

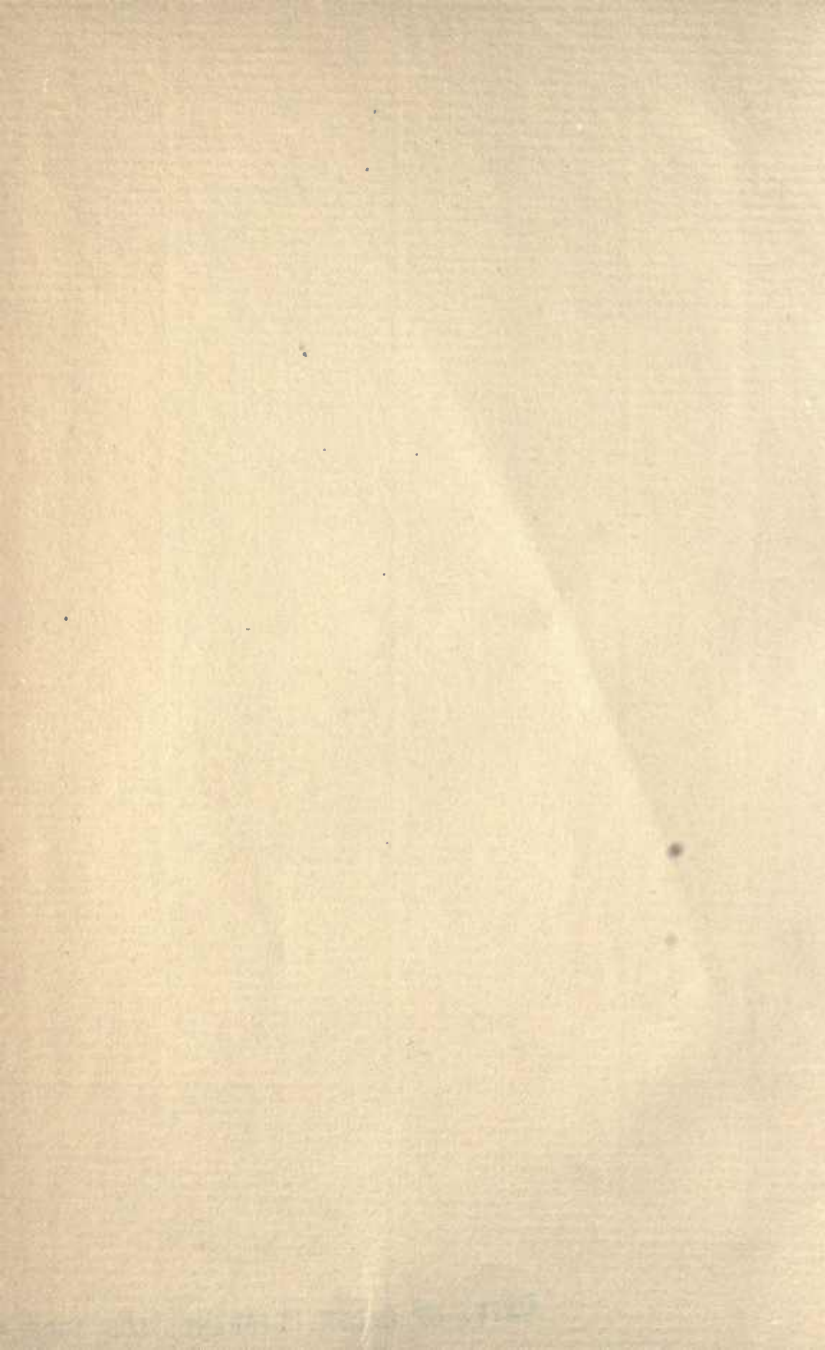
HESTER BLAIR

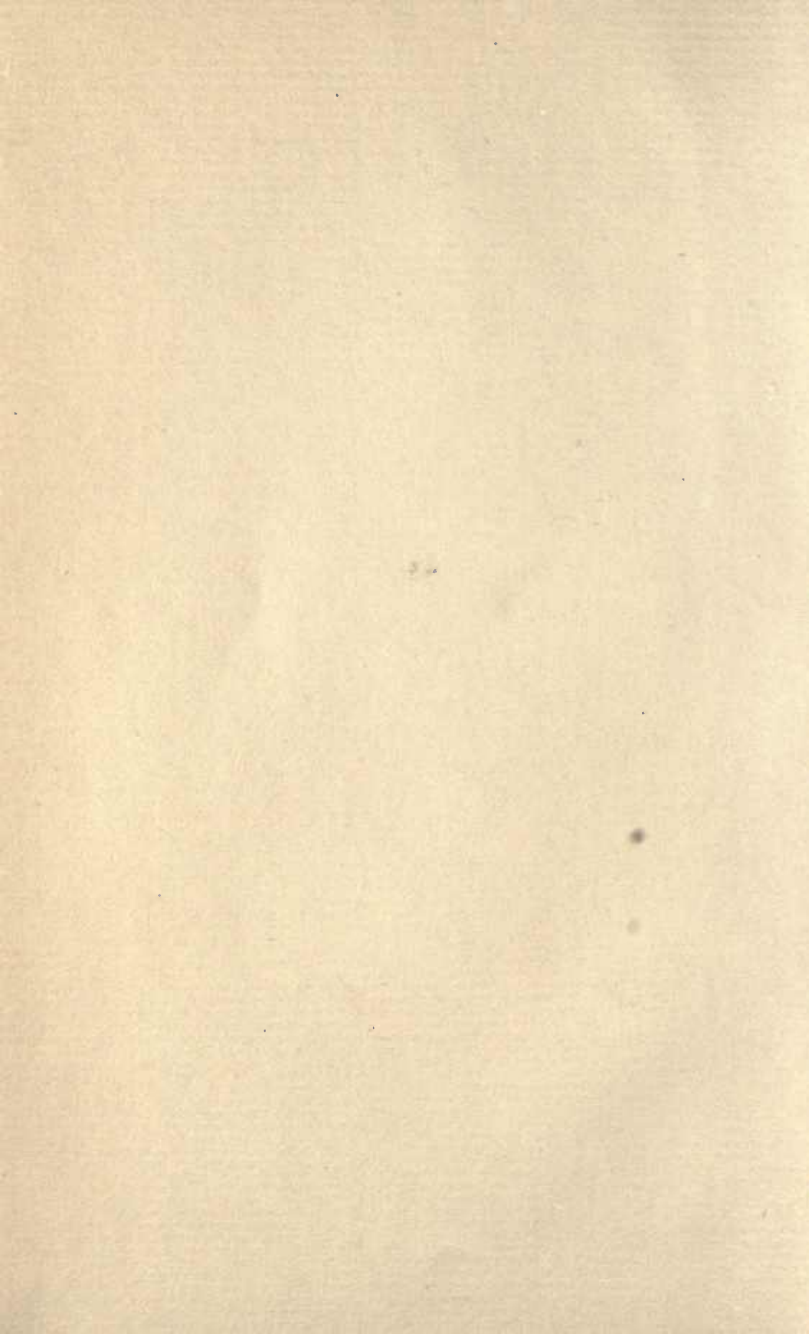


WILLIAM HENRY CARSON

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HESTER BLAIR

THE ROMANCE OF
A COUNTRY GIRL

By

WILLIAM HENRY CARSON

With Illustrations by
CHARLES H. STEPHENS



BOSTON

C. M. Clark Publishing Company

1902

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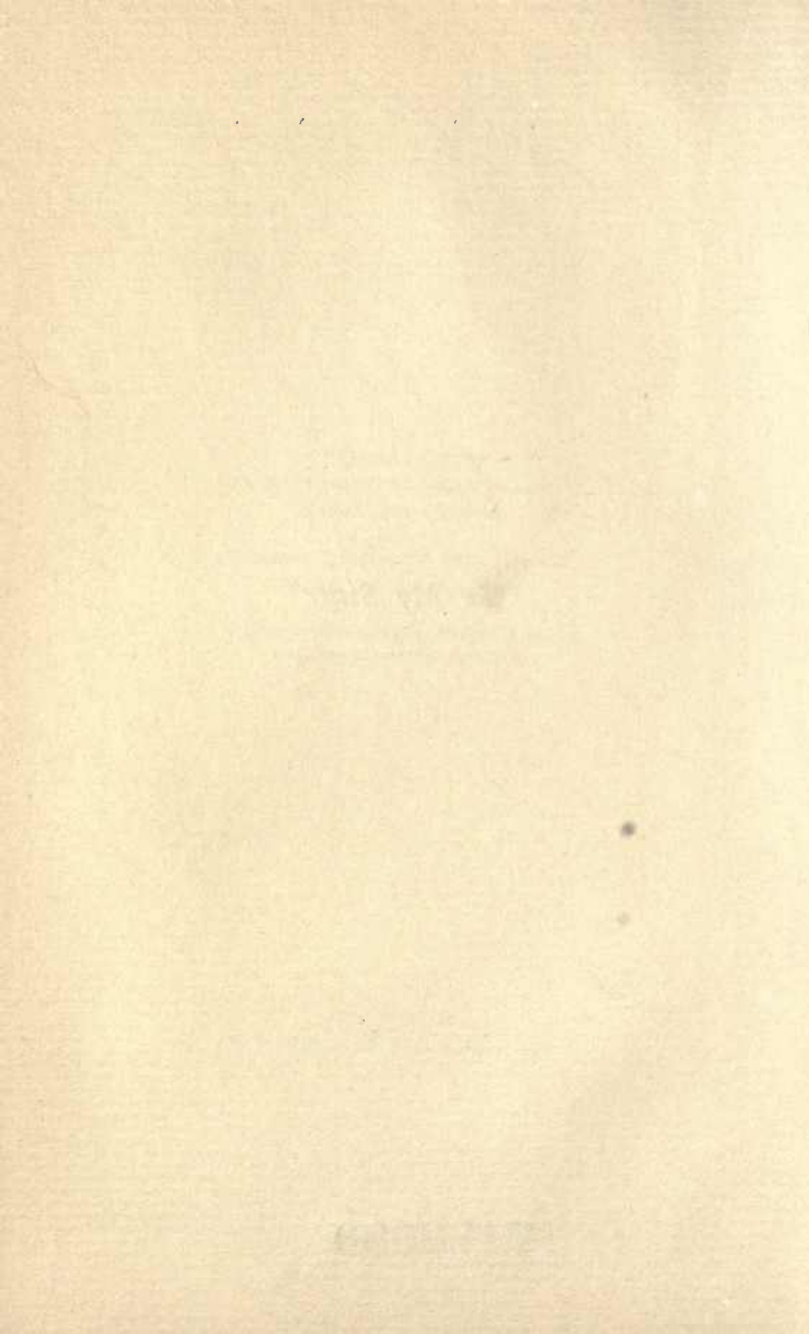
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To My Sister

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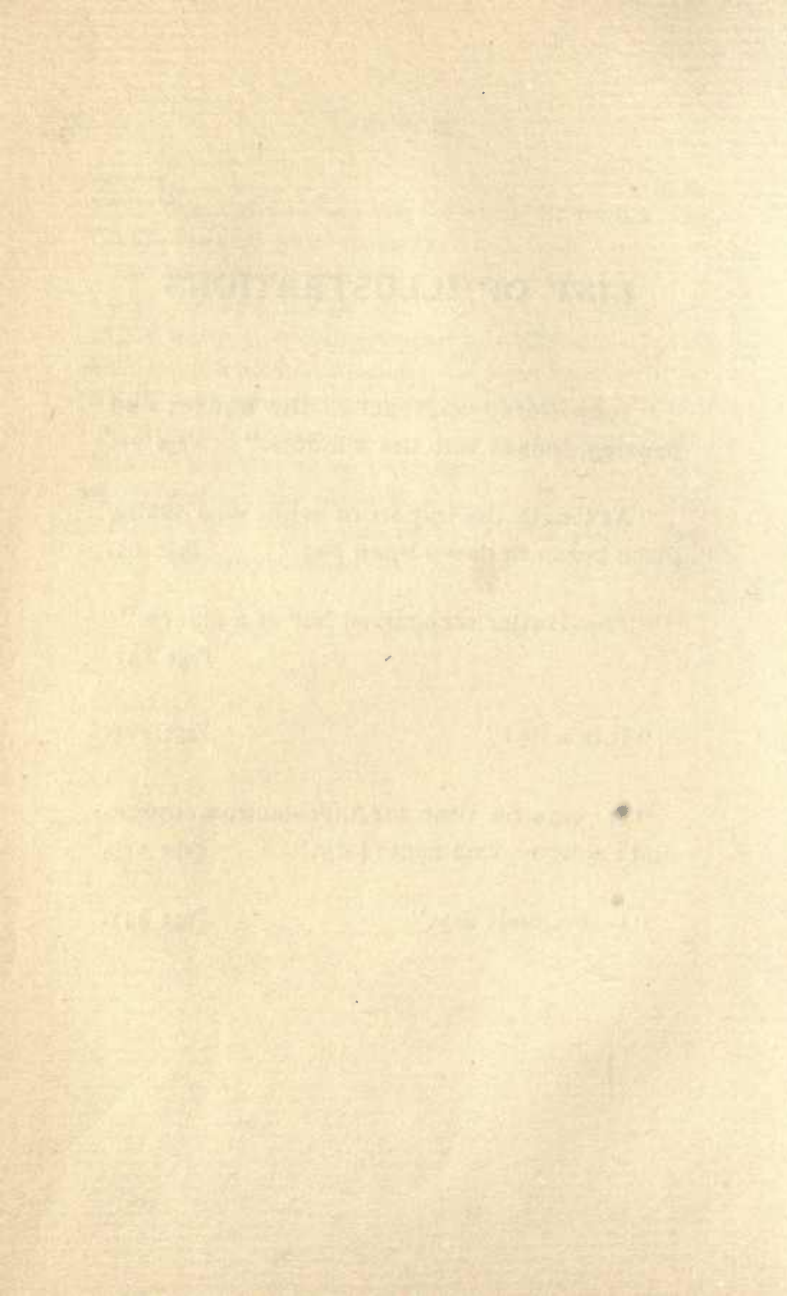
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PREFACE

A PREFACE to an author's first work might, it seems to me, be deemed an impertinence. However, new authors, young or old in years, if not in judgment, have a last word to say; and, in my opinion, most improperly say it in the form of an introduction to their work. It were better, perhaps, with justice to himself and his readers, that his foreword embody an apology. What right has he to presume on the reader's patience or good-nature? Most assuredly, none; and yet—and yet I have a story to tell. It is a simple tale, as life is simple, yet running through it, the veins, eddies, and undercurrents that make our lives more or less complex. Each of us knows a Hester, a John Cary or a Slack. They are of the common, everyday sort of people. I have endeavored to paint them as they are—of flesh and blood. This is a plain tale of love, of joy, of suffering. However, it may be I have failed in the telling. Perhaps I have told too little, perhaps too much; yet—still—

THE AUTHOR.

44 Broadway, New York City.

January 1st, 1902.

HESTER BLAIR

CHAPTER I

LOVE WANDERS FAR AFIELD

Vain Cupid decked with bow and shield
Stole forth, for passion's flame burned low.
Unwary, wandering far afield,
Love's embers died into a glow.
And love, unguarded, slumbered on;
Returning, Cupid smiling spake:
Thy cavalier comes anon,
Arise to meet him, love, awake.

“SLACK DORKINS!”

A querulous voice broke the summer stillness. The dying tones were drowned by the suppressed laughter of a group of fishermen at work mending fishing nets in front of the Blair homestead. Captain Edwards, one of the number, raising his hand to command silence, answered,—

“Yes, Millie!”

A laugh followed the captain's attempt at mimicry. Seth Binks' voice interrupted the merriment with:

“Slack'll hev ter take it.”

“Yer kin bet he will!” responded the captain, as he resumed his work.

Again the voice from within the house caused a momentary suspension of work.

"Slack Dorkins, how much longer yer goin' ter keep th' yard cluttered up with them pesky fishin' nets?"

The captain's unmusical voice sent back the reply: "Most finished, Millie."

A second wave of merriment rewarded the captain's effort, gradually dying into a suppressed chuckle. He stood up, stretched himself lazily, and, walking to the side of the house, swept the bay and harbor of Norton with a keen eye. He muttered musingly:

"What be th' dern cuss a doin'? What's a keepin' 'im?"

Seth Binks ceased working. From his hand which he raised in the air, a piece of rope dangled. An expression of amused disapproval overspread his kindly, weatherbeaten features. He looked about at the uncouth, roughly-garbed fishermen, and his hand came down on his knee with resounding vehemence. He blurted out:

"What d'yer s'pose the big lubber did yest'-dey?"

"Dun know," drawlingly ejaculated one of the listeners, "What?"

"Refused a ten-dollar note ter take a party outside sailin'." Joe looked his disgust.

"No!" exclaimed one of the fishermen doubtfully.

"Yes he did," continued Joe, "sed he was en-

gaged, 'n' what d'yer think the big lout hed ter do?"

"Court Millie," rejoined Seth, "Thet's what he's bin a doin' the most of his time for the past twenty years."

"No," retorted Joe warmly, "Ther'd be some sense even in courtin' a woman as won't be courted. He hed ter fix a flower-bed fer Hester and Ethy. What d'yer think er thet?"

Mixed exclamations of disapproval from the fishermen, and a contemptuous grunt from Captain Edwards, voiced their opinion as between a ten-dollar note and fixing a flower-bed.

"Slack must be crazy!" volunteered one of the fishermen.

"Yes," answered Binks, "crazy as a coot; or p'r'haps he's love-mad; but if it's er th' kind thet 'fects th' appetite, then Slacky ain't mad; fer he kin eat more'n any three men in th' county."

"All's I've got ter say," rejoined Captain Edwards warmly, "'s thet ef I wer' Slacky, Millie would marry me, or she wouldn't. I'd hev it settled one way or t'other."

"Hev yer say out," Binks replied. "Yer don't hev it of'n when yer at home."

Captain Edwards turned on him sharply. "What do yer mean?"

"O, nothin'," Binks suavely answered. A suppressed chuckle developed into a roar of laughter, and the captain glared defiantly.

It was well known to everyone in the village

of Norton, that the captain's cloak of authority was surrendered when he entered his own home. His wife ruled him with an iron hand, unsoftened by glove or time; and the man who had done battle with many a gale, who was absolutely without fear when away from home, quailed before her. Brusque, stern, and unyielding in his intercourse with men, he bowed before her superior will. She was known among the villagers as the "Commodore," and answered to the name with becoming condescension.

The awkward silence that followed was interrupted by Portuguese Joe.

"Well," he said, "I wish ther' wer' more mad ones like Slacky."

Sally Pitts, the daughter of one of the fishermen, came from the house, and stood upon the porch. Hearing Slack's name mentioned, she remained motionless, in a listening attitude.

Pen and ink cannot do justice to Sally Pitts: hers was the beauty of the heart, of the mind, of the soul. She was slightly deformed, and walked with a perceptible limp; and her pointed chin, her abnormally high forehead and marked pallor, made her look older than she really was. Her eyes, however, were those of a child of her age,—confidingly gentle, and sympathetic in expression. Living alone with her father, who was stern to the verge of brutality, her life was inexpressibly dreary. Not that she was without friends. To every fisherman in the village she

was related by ties of love,—little sister and good fairy to all. No word of complaint was she ever heard to utter; and her father's harsh treatment was only suspected, not known. She was a constant visitor at the home of the Blairs, but her visits were marred by her father's unreasoning jealousy. Through drink, he had descended the social ladder, to that level where respectability gives place to sullen indifference;—where imagination pictures every hand as turned against him, in an effort to make complete his degradation.

Sally walked slowly to where Joe was sitting, and, as he continued, gently placed one of her white, almost bloodless hands, on his shoulder.

"When Bill Blake was knocked overboard by the boom of his boat in's rough weather's I wer' ever out in, didn't Slack jump in an' pull 'im aboard, with the chances a thousan' t'one he'd drown hisself?"

Sally answered with suppressed excitement, "Yes."

"An'," continued Joe, "when Bill come to, an' tried ter thank Slacky, what d'yer s'pose th' dern cuss sed?"

"What did he say?" asked Sally eagerly.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" roared Joe, his sides shaking with laughter, "he sed,—ha, ha, ha,—he told Bill ef he'd known he'd made sech a dern fuss 'bout it, he'd a let 'im drown."

Sally joined in the laughter, then plaintively:

"O, isn't Slacky brave,—how I wish I could do something for him."

Sam Pitts rose from his seat and walked towards his daughter.

"So yer'd like to do somethin' fer Slack, would yer? S'pose yer begin by doin' somethin' fer me. Ain't I th' fust thet's got a right ter yer? Ain't yer my darter? And a dern pretty one yer air! Didn't I tell yer ter stay at home an' mend my oil-skin coat?" He grasped Sally by the shoulder and shook her roughly.

"I did mend it, Dad," she faltered, "I came here because Hester sent for me."

A simultaneous movement was made by the fishermen. Captain Edwards rose threateningly, and turned to Sam.

"Hold on ther', yer big lubber, leave 'er alone!"

Pitts turned on him angrily.

"What's it ter you! She's my gal, an' I don't want 'er up here, where every one's a coddlin' 'er. By'n by, with 'er fine clothes, an' 'er fine airs, she won't know 'er own father."

Pitts released Sally and regarded her threateningly.

At that moment Slack Dorkins approached by the path that led from the village. He was a typical Yankee, tall and muscular. His Christian name was Hiram, but from childhood he had always been known by the name of Slack,—

a name given him because of his habitual untidiness. His hair, in a chronic state of disorder, stood out in all directions; his garments hung loosely upon his angular form, and his general air was that of a "ne'er-do-well." But in his case appearances belied the man; for he was courageous to the verge of daring, tender as a woman, and true to his friends. His patience could be measured by his love for Millie, who, for the past twenty years had been the housekeeper in the Blair family. For that length of time he had loved her; but from her he received little encouragement and scant courtesy: but such affectionate recognition as she grudgingly bestowed upon him, lightened his labors, and made glad the heart of this solitary man. Her daily lectures on the sin of untidiness, he received with appropriate humility, but with concealed delight. So long as he could be near her, and love her in his blind, unwavering way, he was content.

After the death of Henry Blair, Slack had taken upon himself, as his right, the supervision of the household. The two daughters of Henry Blair, Hester and Ethel, when left alone had turned, as if by instinct, to Slack. He asked for no confidences, he gave no advice, but assumed all responsibility; and under his personal guidance, things went on as before. It was believed up to the day of his death, that Henry Blair was wealthy. What the true condition of his affairs

were, none knew but Slack; and he was not of a communicative nature, when the subject concerned the members of the Blair household.

As Slack stood before the enraged Pitts, he took in the situation at a glance. He was not pleased. He laid his hand caressingly on Sally's head, and spoke drawlingly, as was his custom.

"Sally, go inter th' house, Millie's bin a lookin' fer yer all day."

When Sally was out of hearing, he approached Sam and touched him on the shoulder. Pitts turned, and regarded him with contemptuous indifference. Slack's drawl, as he spoke, was seemingly accentuated. Under undue excitement or provocation, he fell into this method of delivery, and his words came in a slow, measured monotone,—a pause after each word. Seldom heard, the tone of his voice boded no good, and the fishermen looked up apprehensively.

"Sam, yer be a bigger man, an' maybe a stronger man then I be; an' th' next time yer lay a finger on Sally, I'll give yer a chance ter prove it."

"What der yer mean?" asked Pitts doggedly.

Slack looked him steadily in the eyes, then answered:

"I mean jest this: that the next time yer strike thet gal er yourn, ef yer don't lick me, I'll give yer th' dernest threshin' yer ever hed."

Pitts muttered sullenly:

“Yer’d better mind yer own business, an’ don’t meddle with what don’t consarn yer.”

Slack picked up a fishing net and critically examined it. He spoke quietly—his eyes on the net.

“I’ve sed all I’m goin’ ter say, Sam, only this—remember it! Boys,” he said, turning to the others, “We’ll hev ter finish th’ nets down ter the wharf; the gals and the summer folks ’ll be back soon.” His habitual good-nature returning, he laughed softly, then turned to Captain Edwards.

“Yer’d better stay an’ see the widder, Captain; she was askin’ fer yer.” A roar of laughter greeted this intelligence. Slack continued: “John seys we kin finish th’ nets on th’ old wharf.”

Captain Edwards looked up. “John’s goin’ away, ain’t he?” he asked.

“D’n know nothin’ ’bout John’s business. It takes pretty much all my spare time ter ’tend ter my own.”

“Well, I heard so.”

“Did yer?” Slack’s aggravating unconcern did not please the doughty captain, who answered:

“Yes, an’ they say as how Hester an’ Ethy be a goin’ ’way this Fall; an’ th’ old place’s ter be kept shet up.”

Slack again examined the nets without manifesting any marked degree of interest.

“Em!” he drawled, “’pears ter me yer hear all there’s a goin’ on. Eny more?”

"Well I know what's goin' on, I kin tell yer. I know what's what. Mr. Featherly's gettin' pretty sweet on Hester. Thet's one thing I know."

The interest awakened spurred the captain on.

"Hevn't I seed 'em a walkin' on the beach night arter night, him a talkin' earnest like, an' she a lookin' up inter his face, an' not seemin' to keer whether th' wer' any one else in th' world or no? Yer can't tell me thet don't mean so'thin'."

Captain Edwards was treading on dangerous ground. Slack's habitual expression of good nature gave place to an ominous scowl. His drawl as he answered was not reassuring.

"Well, thet don't go ter prove nothin'. Hester hes as good right ter walk on th' beach as other folks, an' she couldn't go 'long with a better man 'n Mr. Featherly. Es far as I *know* ther's no law agin' her walkin' on the beach ef she be so disposed."

"No more ther' ben't ef Mr. Featherly be honest with er."

Still slower and more distinct came the answer.

"She be as good as he. She hev th' finest edication hereabouts. 'Lowin' the ole man Blair didn't leave no money, she's able ter take keer of herself, I do be a thinkin'."

The captain nodded his head doubtingly.

"Mebby, mebbly. They say as how Hessie's a goin' ter New York, an' it 'pears ter me thet's no

place fer a young gal ter go alone; leastwise no gal er mine should go ther."

"How der yer know thet, Captain?" demanded Seth Binks.

With a knowing wink Captain Edwards replied, "O, I catch on ter things."

"Yer catch on ter too dern much," drawled Slack. "It'll pull yer under some time."

"P'rhaps 'twill. All I've got ter say, it's a dern fool thing ter do, anyhow, an'" continued the captain with emphasis, "ef th' ole man wer' alive, it wouldn't be did."

"Well, bein' as how th' ole man hesn't ben 'live these two years, he ain't 'tall likely ter interfere, an'"—Slack's words came with measured distinctness,—"it's my 'pinion, when Hester wants eny 'dvice from some folks she'll ask it of 'em."

Captain Edwards recognized the note of warning in Slack's voice. He answered in a conciliatory tone.

"Yer needn't git so dern cranky 'bout it, Slacky."

Slack fumbled the nets nervously; he was not wholly appeased. A tender spot was touched when Hester or John Cary was the subject of remark or gossip. He was not easily aroused to anger, and those who knew him well, took care not to invite his displeasure. During the greater part of the colloquy Slack had been examining the fishing nets. He arose and turned slowly.

His voice was tempered with an honest regard for the man whom he addressed.

"Captain, we've ben friends fer th' past twenty er more years, an' I don't want ter break with yer now; but I got this ter say ter yer:—don't discuss what consarns the Blair gals or John. What's ther business is *ther* business, an' don't consarn you. I'm no quarreling man, but Captain, it'll be better fer you an' fer me, ef yer leave 'em alone."

He turned to the listening group.

"Boys," he said quietly, "take th' nets down ter th' wharf an' we'll finish 'em ther."

The fishermen gathered the nets together and walked slowly down the hill to the wharf. Slack stood at the edge of the path looking in the direction of the village. Captain Edwards was the last to leave, and, as he passed Slack, his hand came down on the fisherman's shoulder with resounding force. Neither spoke, but they both understood:—their life friendship was still intact.

Slack turned in the direction of the house. He knew only too well, that what the captain had said was, for the most part, true. It was no news to him; and his heart was heavy with forebodings that he could not understand, much less explain.

Since the death of her father, Hester Blair recognized the necessity of earning a living for herself and her younger sister, Ethel. The homestead being large, contributed to this end; and

for the past two summers the house had been filled with summer boarders. People in search of health and quiet, found here what they desired; but they brought with them the atmosphere of city life, that upset the homely, traditional customs of the household. Fine airs did not appeal to the inmates of the Blair home; and the intellectual bearing of the visitors, and their studied repression of all natural emotions were, to the Blair family, unconvincing. Millie served them well—her reputation as a cook and housekeeper was at stake—but she disliked them cordially. Only one of the visitors, Mrs. Pendleton, better known as “The Widder,” had, with good-natured persistence and tact, ingratiated herself into Millie’s favor. This was, however, not easily accomplished, for it took more than soft words to win Millie’s regard. The revenue from these summer boarders insured Ethel’s education; and this fact, more than any other, mollified the obstreperous housekeeper.

Slack paused in his walk and leaned against the back of a summer bench. Retrospectively he thought of the changes that had gradually, but surely, turned the current of their lives into unknown channels. He spoke musingly: “They all know it. I’ve seen it fer a long time. Everything is changed since these pesky people came ter live here. Does John know? Does he suspect? I hev’n’t seen ’im smile fer a month; an’ Gosh! How thet boy loves Hessie.”

With elastic step, the subject of Slack's concern strode up the hill and stood before the cogitating fisherman.

John Cary had long since passed that period of life when he could be appropriately designated as "Thet boy." He was good to look upon;—tall, square-shouldered, square-jawed, with a frank open countenance that invited confidence. He was of that class of men that women love, and men respect. Nature had been kind to John Cary, and he looked, in the bright summer sunshine, what he was—a true type of American manhood.

Slack's eyes flashed an honest, hearty greeting. He motioned John to a seat, and regarded him with fatherly affection.

"Well, John, why didn't yer go boatin'?" Without waiting for an answer he continued: "I left th' folks down ter th' wharf. Where be they?"

"They'll be home directly," John answered, "I saw them going through the village."

"Why didn't yer go with them, John? Hessie 'll be disappointed."

John remained silent. A serious light shone in his eyes. His companion, meanwhile, watched him narrowly: he guessed aright what was passing through the young lover's mind—guessed that doubt had begun to eat its way into his heart. Neither spoke for a few moments; their eyes met, and John knew that the fears which

filled his heart, were entertained by his fisherman friend. Millie's voice came as a relief.

"Slack, I say, Slack Dorkins, you come right in here!"

Slack's face assumed a rueful expression, then he chuckled quietly.

"Now I'll hev ter take it fer hevin' the boys 'round. Sit down, John, th' folks 'll be here in a minute." He looked in the direction of the village, then continued: "My daily lecture's due 'bout now; how do my hair look, wuss 'n' common?"

He removed his cap, disclosing a head of hair wondrous in its wild, unkempt disorder. Surely never did hair of human being grow with such reckless abandon, and with utter disregard of order or symmetry. Of no known color or colors—for there were as many as the "Famous coat,"—it literally stood on end: a crowning vindication of the appropriateness of the name that had clung to him since boyhood,—Slack. He made a wry face and entered the house.

John seated himself on the summer bench. "I am a fool," he said softly, "to believe that she cares for me. She has outgrown her childhood love. Young, beautiful, she has had social advantages that I never enjoyed. I am not the same to her since these visitors came; but I do not take kindly to their ways:—they are not of my kind, and I doubt if I could ever become one of them. Is the fault with me? Has my life of

work, the aims and ambitions that I have lived for, unfitted me for contact with the world? Their talk depresses me;—even in their sports and pleasures I seem to see an artificiality that I despise. Perhaps I should have moved more among them, and become better acquainted with their ways. I have been taught to look upon women with respect, while they—God! it makes my blood boil.”

A hand was laid lightly on his shoulder, and a soft, musical, cultured voice interrupted his reverie.

“Why John! communing with yourself! that’s misanthropic. Why didn’t you come boating?”

“Did you miss me, Hester?”

“How can you ask? We all missed you.”

“Did you really care whether I went or not?”

“Why, how serious you are! You know I would have been glad to have had you with us. And such delightful sailing!”

“Yes, I believe you would have been glad, as you would to have had any of your friends,—no more, no less.”

“John, dear,” she laughingly exclaimed, “what a rueful countenance! you are actually becoming morbid. I shall have to prescribe for you. Let me see! boating every other day; lawn tennis every evening; and an hour each day spent in the society of Mrs. Pendleton.”

John raised his hand protestingly, “the hour a day,” he rejoined, “would be——.”

"My dear John, you are prejudiced. She is really charming; and furthermore, I believe, I truly believe, she is fond of you."

"Heaven protect me," John exclaimed, with a nod of his head. "Pendleton's the happy man!"

"Why, John, Mr. Pendleton is dead!"

"Exactly! Happy man! But seriously, Hester, I came to-day to tell you that I think of going away."

"Going away?" she echoed.

"Yes," he replied, "my uncle has offered me a position in his shipping office in New York."

"I am so glad for you, John."

"Wouldn't you miss me?" he asked.

"Of course we should all miss you," she answered. "How can you ask such a question?"

"Ah! Hester, it is more to me now than you know, or can guess. We have loved each other since childhood, and leaving the old place is not the hardest to bear."

"Changes must come in the lives of all of us," she replied sadly. "As you know, my father left us nothing but the homestead. Ethel's education must be provided for; and it is my intention to go to some large city after the summer season, and earn a living for us both."

"You, Hester!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," she replied. "Fortunately, I am fitted for it by education: my musical training has been most thorough, and, if work will accomplish anything, I shall succeed."

"Hester, can nothing dissuade you from this course?" Taking her hand in both his own, he continued, "You do not realize the difficulties to be overcome, the suffering to be endured, the humiliation, and worse than all—possible failure."

"Yes," she replied sadly, "I have considered it all, again and again. My decision is final."

"Hester, you know my love for you. I am now in a position to offer you a home. Will you listen to me?"

"I cannot," she replied tremulously, "I cannot. Don't ask me for explanations that I am unable to give. I have dreaded this moment John dear; but it is best for both of us that we continue as we are."

"I have seen the change come over you Hester," he replied sadly, "but I trusted, with love's blind faith, that our old love story would be renewed. Can nothing alter your decision?"

"Nothing," she replied, "nothing. I have not the love to give you that you deserve. I know the fault is mine, but it would be unfair to mislead you. Don't blame me, John dear, but I cannot."

The chatter of the guests could be heard as they ascended the hill.

"Will you stay to supper, John?"

"No," he replied, "not to-night."

She entered the house. John walked to the bluff, and seating himself on a bench, looked out

over the harbor and bay. He wished to be alone, for the noisy mirth of the returning guests filled him with a spirit of resentment.

Twilight came, lingered, and deepened into night; the lights flickered along the shore, like restless spirits of the sea; and the gleam from the lighthouse on the point, flashed intermittently a brazen warning of danger over the water. The port lights of a coasting vessel, southbound, blinked a feeble defiance, and crept on, like a will-o-the-wisp, low on the horizon. Now and again a snatch of a song from some belated fishermen rose, siren-like, the splash of their oars keeping time to the tune of the unseen toilers of the sea, their song rising and falling in weird-like cadences. The thoughts of the silent listener were delving in the past. He was living again the days of his boyhood, when with Hester, they explored every nook on the rugged coast, and made their first promises of never-ending love; of later years, when, with the awkward modesty of young womanhood and manhood, they renewed their vows of constancy; of his despair, after Hester had gone to Europe to complete her education; and of the letters they had exchanged, burdened with fond endearments. Then, after a lapse of time, of an unconscious something coming between them—a change in the tone of her letters; of her return, the same companion of his childhood, yet, though he could not explain it, not the same. He lived again through the period

when the death of Mr. Blair brought them together in a closer bond;—when he felt himself the natural protector of the woman whose love was, to him, his life. He dwelt upon the advent of the strangers into the Blair home, which had interrupted their daily intercourse; and he realized that with them had come the cloud that obscured his happiness, and robbed him of the love that had been his. He had felt the change that had come over Hester; had noted the growing intimacy between her and Featherly; and, though in his heart he knew that hope was struggling against his better judgment, he realized that she was lost to him.

The soft breeze fretted the surface of the water; the waves at the foot of the bluff sent back sobbing little echoes, and splashed complainingly on the beach, keeping time to the sea's unceasing throb. Solemn, mysterious night closed in upon the world, and upon the hopes of the silent figure, as he sat looking out over the sea.

CHAPTER II

SLACK'S RECREANT WOOING

I have waited an' I've waited, it is nigh on twenty year;
An' I've begged yer fer th' weddin' day ter name.
I have ast yer times unnumbered; Now jest tell me Millie
dear,
If I must go on a waitin' jest th' same?
Yer a tellin' me ter day, what yer told me years ago,
And my patience's worn as thin can be;
For I love yer, an' I love yer, a hundred times I've told yer
so,
Tell me, sometime will yer answer *yes* ter me?

THE following day Millie and Slack stood upon the porch watching the guests as they descended the hill to the wharf. The eyes of the spinster followed them until they disappeared from view. She held them in pitying contempt; and it was with a sigh of relief that she saw them take their departure; for it assured her an afternoon's quiet, and relieved her from the efforts of constant self-restraint that she was forced to exercise. When they were about it was with difficulty that she could disguise her feelings, and it required an effort on her part to treat them with common courtesy. Their patronizing familiarity she resented; and their attempts at a closer relationship she received with chilly, studied politeness. She protested that they

talked too much; that they didn't mean what they said, and, worse than all, that they were afflicted with the unpardonable sin of never returning things to their proper places; and soft words, languidly spoken, could not appease the methodical Millie for what she termed their "city bringing up."

"Where be they a goin' now?" she asked with a toss of her head.

"Why, fishin' o' course," answered Slack. "They heven't caught 'em all yet."

"Huh! the clack of their tongues would scare a shark away!" With withering scorn she continued, "How they do love ter talk! an' th' wust of it is it don't mean nothin'. I wish they wer' goin' 'way t'morrer. No I don't! I wish th' house wer' twice as large, an' we had twice as many boarders. The gals need the money; but them pesky people do drive me nigh crazy."

Slack maintained a discreet silence. After a pause he ventured:

"Why didn't Hessie go 'long?"

"D'n know. Guess she sees 'nough of 'em at home."

"Did Mr. Featherly go?"

"Don't think he did," answered Millie, "thet Mr. Fenton sent fer 'im ter go out ter his yacht. Sally Hopkins tole me, thet her brother Sam says they do cut up ter'bly on thet boat:—play cards an' drink. O, it's som'thin' scand'lous!"

"Em!" was Slack's non-committal reply.

The conversation lagged. The sound of the piano came through the window. The touch was that of a master hand, and the flood of melody filled the hearts of the listeners with delight.

"How she do play," said Slack.

Walking to the end of the porch nearest the sea, he sat in a chair; but comfort was to be denied him. Millie's voice drowned the tones of the piano.

"Good Lor'! Slack Dorkins, yer be a sittin', on thet tidy as Ethel knitted with her own hands! Git up out'n thet cheer."

Slack jumped as if stung. Tidies he held in special abhorrence. Millie scrutinized him closely. Surely there was dust on his coat. She held a whisk-broom in her hand and shook it at him threateningly.

"Take thet broom," she exclaimed as she approached the unfortunate fisherman, "an' whisk yerself out in th' yard. Good Lor', what'll become of yer, anyhow?"

Slack had taken special pains with his dress, with a fixed determination to surprise Millie, and wring from her some slight word of approbation. He had adorned himself with a new cravat, and had waited expectantly for a word of praise. He was somewhat taken aback that his unusually spruce appearance should not only go unnoticed, but that nightmare of his existence, dust, was still with him. He took the broom obediently and, with many flourishes, removed

the offending dust and presented himself for inspection.

"How do I look, Millie?"

Critically she scanned the offender. "Well," she vouchsafed, "yer don' look no wuss than yer wer'."

"Why," blurted the erring fisherman, "I thought I looked pretty good. Put on this new cravat ter see how yer'd like it."

"Huh! new cravats look well on a great hulk of a man like you."

Her eyes traveled to his hair; her features took on an expression of withering disgust. The man before her shuddered: he remembered his hair,—in his anxiety to display his new cravat he had forgotten the combing process.

"Yer see, Millie," he began penitently——

She interrupted him. "Don't yer talk back ter me, till yer lookin' fitter 'n yer do now." With a scornful glance she continued: "Don't yer move, Slack Dorkins, don't yer move!"

She entered the house, and if she were not so absorbed with her desire to tidy up the universe, she might have heard a suppressed chuckle following her retreating footsteps. The eyes of the culprit on the porch twinkled merrily; then as Millie reappeared with a basin of water and a comb, sought the ground as became true abasement.

Straightway, Millie proceeded to administer

to the rebellious head of hair, such a soaking as it had not received for many a day. The water splashed into her victim's eyes, and ran in streams down his neck. His collar, which he had donned in anticipation of an afternoon in Millie's company, fell before the watery onslaught. The new cravat, alas! received its first baptism, and lay like a wet rag, damp and disheveled.

When head and hair would absorb no more water, the comb was brought into play and wielded with determined vigor. That head of hair *must* be conquered. All went well until she attempted to part it. It was then that rebellion took possession of the bristly growth, and of Millie's temper. It would not part straight. She slapped it, she pulled it; no, the part took a zig-zag course. Undaunted, she tried the other side with like results. An idea occurred to her. Now Millie was a woman of action, as well as of determination. She cast a threatening glance at her victim and re-entered the house, hurling back the command, "Don't yer move!"

The uncautious Slack gave way to a burst of laughter, until warned by Millie's returning footsteps. She held a cup in her hand; and advanced with the self-satisfied air of one who had solved a knotty problem.

"What yer got ther'?" asked Slack.

"Never yer mind," was the enlightening response, "jest yer hold yer head."

The contents of the cup, to the last drop, was emptied on Slack's unruly hair, and the molasses—for that it was—percolated through the dense growth with characteristic slowness. A triumphant smile overspread Millie's countenance; and with a sigh of satisfaction she renewed the combing and parting. The comb stuck. She pulled with energy, nor rested until the shiny, sticky mass clung, as if glued, to the scalp of the enraptured fisherman. She stepped back to view the result of her muscular efforts.

"Ther'," she exclaimed, "yer best friend wouldn't know yer."

A smile of idiotic delight rewarded her. Slack took a large, coarse comb from his pocket, and handed it to the spinster.

"Yer see, Millie," he said, "arter th' dressin' down yer give me t'other day, I went ter th' village an' bought this yer curry, an' by gum! arter I washed up, I clean forgot ter use it. I feel so dern good now, I don't believe I'll ever comb my hair agin. Keep th' curry, Millie, an' when my hair needs it, I'll come 'round and hev yer dress it."

"D'yer mean ter tell me yer don't comb yer hair at least twice a day?" Her tone was freighted with disgust.

"What's th' good on't! Ther's no one ter see it when it be combed." With a ludicrous attempt at tenderness he continued: "Ef yer'd marry me,

Millie, I'd comb it—I'd comb it till ther'd be no hair left ter comb."

"Yer know well 'nough, Slack Dorkins, thet Hessie and Ethy can't git 'long 'thout *me*."

"Yer know well 'nough, thet *I* can't get 'long 'thout *you*."

Though Millie would not acknowledge it, the love of this man was as necessary to her existence and happiness as the air she breathed. But she toyed with his heart and his love, because she knew they were hers, without stint or reservation. Were she accused of more than ordinary regard for the man, who, for twenty years, had waited for the word that she withheld, she would deny it. Yet she loved him. Through all these years she had looked upon him as absolutely her own. No doubt of his loyalty, no fear that he might be lost to her, had ever quickened her heart beats;—that such a contingency might arise, had never occurred to her. She received his blind, patient love as her right, and gave but little in return; but that little was the sunshine that illumined the pathway of his existence. A smile meant to Slack a week of happiness, an affectionate word unguardedly uttered—for Millie's indifference was assumed—was bliss. So their life went on—he loving and waiting, she receiving his devotion with affected unconcern, and querulous upraiding.

Millie gathered up some working materials,

that were on a small table on the porch, and prepared to enter the house. She turned to the fisherman and spoke:

“Slacky, all men say they can’t get ’long ’thout a woman,—an’ when they git her, they can’t git ’long *with* her. Yer better off as yer are. Keep on with yer fishin’ an’ scrapin’ thet fiddle o’ yourn in th’ cabin o’ yer schooner, an’ *don’t* be a fool!”

And with this sage-like and philosophical bolt of wisdom, she sought the sacred precincts of the kitchen.

Slack’s answering chuckle was not indicative of a profound impression having been made upon him,—nor had there been. He whistled softly and walked in the direction of the barn.

The music continued. It rose and fell, varying from a wild Moorish song, to a tumultuous outpouring of sound, as if echoing the cry of a lost soul. If Hester were telling her story in melody, she had touched the fountain spring of life’s emotions, that now surged in torrents of sound through the open door and window, and died upon the quiet of the summer day.

Young, beautiful, talented, Hester had, during her father’s lifetime, received every educational advantage that money could procure. Two years she had spent in European travel, and in the completion of her musical education, having returned but a short time before her father’s death.

Henry Blair had been the local magistrate. He

had been everyone's friend; and it was only after his death, that it was discovered that the man whom all believed wealthy, had left nothing but the homestead, and a name that lived after him.

After her father's death, Hester immediately set to work with the courage of her race. The care and education of her sister Ethel came first; of herself, and her future, she had no fear. Calm, dispassionate, of a superior order of intelligence, she looked her position squarely in the face. She recognized her responsibility, and met it with fortitude and decision; yet, underlying it all, was a passionate desire for the higher things of life than her surroundings or conditions indicated or allowed. She had returned to her old home after the years of absence, the same loving daughter and sister; but contact with the world, that never fails to leave its imprint for good or for evil, had left its stamp upon her. Her girlhood love for John Cary had given place to a sincere respect and friendly regard. Contentment had been replaced by vague, unconscious unrest.

Ralph Featherly came over the brow of the hill from the village, and, pausing, stood in a listening attitude before the window of the room in which Hester was playing. Half an hour went by and still he listened.

By the advice of his friend and classmate, Dr. Coulton, who was the rector of the village church, he had been induced to come to Norton for the

summer, to regain his health. Though carefully guarded, it was known to a few of his closest friends that he was suffering from heart disease. He had lived in New York the life of a wealthy young man about town, which is not conducive to good health, particularly to one suffering from an organic trouble. His father was of the fourth generation of a line of ancestors who had been bankers: but he had retired from active business, and, of the firm of Featherly & Co., his son Ralph was the actual head.

Hester turned and met the gaze of the young man fixed upon her.

"What," she exclaimed, "not boating?"

"No," he replied, "I went as far as the wharf and then decided not to go."

"But I thought you enjoyed fishing."

"So I do, but I like music better. Why do you reserve such a fine performance until you are alone?"

"Perhaps I was in the humor," she laughed.

"One hardly expects to hear such music in this far-away spot."

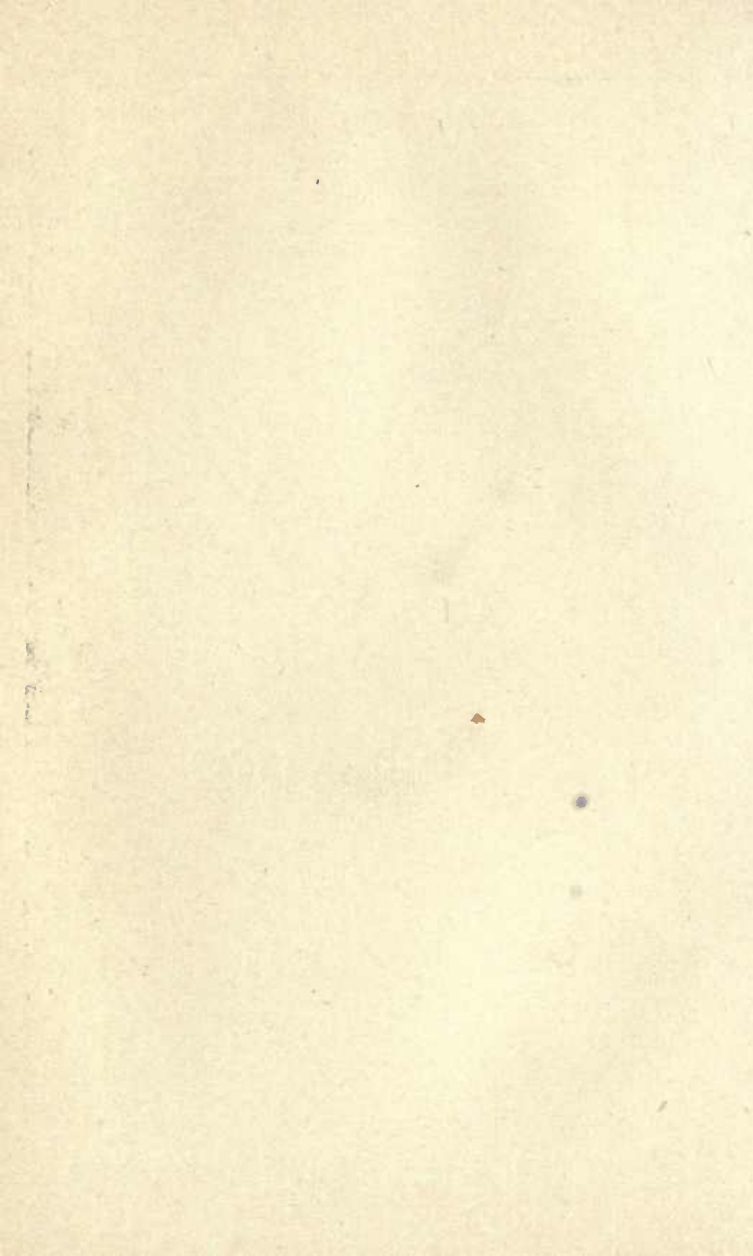
She did not reply, but her hands strayed lightly over the keys. Featherly entered the room and leaned against the piano.

"Do you know," he said, "I sometimes think it is a pity that you had not chosen a public career."

"It is not too late," she smilingly rejoined, "I am not past the age."



“John Carey approached the house ; and pausing, looked into the window.”



"True," he replied.

"I shall go to some large city after the summer season and make the attempt. I can but fail."

"You have everything in your favor. Have you decided where you will go?"

"New York," she answered, "is my first choice."

"In that," he replied, "you are wise. Will you play this?" he asked, placing a sheet of music before her. "It's a favorite of mine."

It was a love song. She played it with exquisite pathos and expression. He leaned over the piano to turn the music. The color swept in waves over her neck and cheeks. The sheet of music slid from the rest, and in the confusion of replacing it their hands met. The touch drove the blood into her cheeks; and the first discordant note marred her generally faultless execution. Her hand was tremulous, and she finished abruptly.

"Don't stop," he begged, "play it again."

Somewhat recomposed, she began softly with a surer touch, and the music rose in melodious abandon. Featherly's eyes were on the beautiful face before him: the changing expression telling the song's story. She seemed to feel his glance and it thrilled her.

John Cary approached the house; and pausing, looked into the window. Neither occupant of the room had noticed his coming. He saw the

heightened color on the cheek of the woman he loved; the attitude of Featherly, his eyes fixed with passionate admiration on her face. He retraced his steps and silently descended the hill to the village.

CHAPTER III

LOVE'S CHAMPION:—" THEN IT'S WAR? "

Man may play with fate and fire, be as daring as he will;
He may brave all dangers known and unknown too.
But measure not your feeble wits with woman's tact and
skill:
For Heaven decreed a lesser share to you.

IT was late afternoon when the guests returned from their fishing trip. They climbed the hill slowly, boisterously happy over what they termed a successful catch. Snatches of songs were interrupted by gibes and jests, delicate but pointed. Mrs. Pendleton sustained the greater part of the jocular burden; but she was equal to the task. It was not positively known, but it was generally believed that the death of Pendleton was her third bereavement; but as she never alluded to any but the last, there was no way of ascertaining the exact number. Of all who conjectured, none were brave enough to venture more than a guess; but by common consent, three were the marital losses she had sustained and survived. She was of that age made doubtful by a devising modiste, and a good, healthy constitution well cared for. None knew better that beauty

" May be retained,
But n'er regained."

She looked eight and twenty,—she might have been forty. But whatever her age, she was a cheery, lovable little woman, whose apparent mission in life was to straighten out all tangled love affairs, make everybody about her as happy as circumstances would allow; circumvent the designing and, Heaven willing, marry again. She was everywhere; she did most things, and did them well. She played whist or lawn tennis with daring and finesse, and was equally at home on a horse, in a boat, or at the piano. Before the first week had elapsed after her arrival, she had the confidences of all the guests; had been made the recipient of family secrets; was conversant with, and listened with sympathetic interest to everyone's hobby,—losing many hours of needful sleep thereby, but gaining the reputation of being a farsighted, intelligent woman. But more than all, she had conquered Millie's prejudices, and had the artful Slack at her feet. She had known Featherly in New York. She treated him with motherly, affectionate consideration; yet she looked the younger of the two; and their friendship, of long standing, privileged her, at times, to mildly lecture him. She had one grievance: Glenn Hopedale Fenton was a friend of Featherly. He had been for some weeks living on his yacht, which was anchored in the harbor of Norton. She had known Fenton in New York; she disliked him; but Featherly laughed her criticisms away with the remark, "that he was a

'good fellow,' that all women were prejudiced, and that she didn't mean half that she said." Fenton frequently visited the Blair family, ostensibly to see Featherly, but he did not deceive Mrs. Pendleton.

Hester and Featherly met the guests at the top of the hill.

"What luck, Laura?" Featherly asked.

Mrs. Pendleton replied, "It was pull and haul from the moment we anchored off the lighthouse point. We have fish enough to feed the whole community. How many have you ladies?"

One of the guests held up her catch. Two small fish dangled from a string. "Two scup," she answered proudly.

Another displayed one solitary specimen of her skill in the bottom of a generous-sized basket. Her voice, however, trilled with true fisherman's pride as she held it aloft. "One tautog." Another less fortunate, with a rueful air, displayed a dog-fish.

"And you, Laura?" demanded Featherly.

"O, well, you see," Mrs. Pendleton answered unblushingly, "together with my duties as chaperon, I assisted Captain Edwards with the management of the boat."

Mrs. Pendleton's answer was received with derisive laughter by the guests.

"Manage the boat," repeated young Stevens, a medical student, "manage the boat! ha, ha! Captain Edwards was in a trance from the mo-

ment Mrs. Pendleton came aboard. Manage the boat indeed! Good joke!" and they filed into the house hurling back a shower of disdainful allusions to chaperons in general, and some terse remarks about heart wreckers in particular.

"How they do enjoy themselves," sighed Mrs. Pendleton, "the dears!"

Hester answered Millie's call and followed the guests, leaving Mrs. Pendleton and Featherly alone. Fenton was coming leisurely up the hill. Mrs. Pendleton turned to Featherly:

"Ralph, aren't you going to dress for dinner? You'll be late."

"Time enough," he rejoined.

Taking him by the arm she turned him around in the direction of the house.

"There, that's a dear boy. Go and dress for dinner. I want a word with Fenton."

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing which concerns you, dear boy; a little matter of business, that's all."

He entered the house as Fenton approached. Mrs. Pendleton turned to meet him.

"What ill-wind brings you here? I thought your boat had left the harbor and we were rid of you."

"Not an over-enthusiastic greeting," he replied. "Perhaps I remained to enjoy your very charming society."

"Bah! Let us be frank! What scheme have you afoot now?"

"My dear Laura——"

"Don't 'dear Laura' me! Look here, Glenn, I've known you for the past ten years, and I never knew you to have one wholesome, honest thought or intention. The only cause for complaint I ever had against poor Pendleton was, that you were a friend of his."

"Laura, you have a most uncomfortable way of alluding to the past; and you are not at your best when you are heroic! Do let bygones alone."

She was not to be put off. She was a determined little woman, and once she had taken a matter in hand, she followed it to the end. She knew Fenton's past life, and she felt that no good would come of his visits to the Blair home. She looked him in the eyes unflinchingly and returned to the attack.

"You came here a month ago apparently to see Featherly. You remain here week after week. I can guess the attraction. I now ask your purpose."

"Laura," he rejoined, "you are a decidedly clever woman, but you assume too much."

He turned as if to enter the house. She took hold of his arm and whirled him round until he faced her.

"Glenn," her tone was determined, "I came here as a summer boarder. I love Hester and Ethel, and I believe they regard me with some degree of affection. I know you to be bad, thoroughly bad. Take my advice and go."

"But suppose I refuse to leave the field? Featherly can't have any serious intentions with regard to Hester:—with his prospects, he couldn't be such a fool. As for that lout Cary——"

"That lout Cary, as you are pleased to call him, is one of nature's noblemen. Of Featherly's intentions I know nothing, but I am satisfied of what yours are. As I before gently intimated,—go."

"And if I decide to remain?" he queried.

"But you won't."

"By Jove! but I will. It isn't every day one meets such a beautiful woman as Hester Blair, and I intend to enter the lists. Featherly isn't a marrying man; but his very marked attentions are not only accepted, but encouraged. It's common talk in the village. The country lover seems to be getting the cold shoulder. My attention—may I add admiration—hasn't made the impression I could wish; but mark me, Laura, you know the world: wealth and social position always have the pole, and in this race, unless I mistake, I shall be in at the finish."

"Glenn," there was a note of entreaty in her voice, "years ago there lived in the city of New York, a young, trusting girl. You know her fate. You were instrumental in driving her to desperation, until she sank to the lowest social depths. She is now living in one of the worst localities in the city."

"She was a fool!" he rejoined angrily.

"She was not a fool, until she was made one by you,—tricked, ensnared and cast aside. You were the cause of breaking up the home of the Hadleys; the husband is drinking himself to death to forget his shame."

"Laura," protested Fenton, "in Heaven's name have done! That's all recorded in the ancient history of Manhattan social life! They are not exceptions, they are simply incidents! That's all!"

"Ah, you provoke me beyond endurance. You never found me wanting in frankness?"

"No, Laura, your worst enemy—if you ever had one—couldn't accuse you of it."

"Good! and you believe me honest in what I say?"

"Distressingly so."

"Glenn, I know you to be a thorough scoundrel."

"That's harsh," he remonstrated.

"But true. Will you leave here?"

"No, I stay."

"Then it's war?"

"So be it." His voice took on a determined ring. "I can at least choose the fighting ground. Let it be here."

"Fenton, I detest you heartily; but you play tennis divinely. We'll have time for a game before dinner. While you remain I'll take care to monopolize your very charming society. *I am*

safe with you, and it will give you less opportunity for harm. Come."

The bulky form of Slack lumbered around the corner of the house. His keen, distrustful glance followed the retreating forms of Mrs. Pendleton and her companion. Slack's knowledge of men and things was neither profound nor far-reaching. His world embraced the territory measured by the eye from the bluff overlooking the village. An occasional visit to Boston gave him a glance of a world of which he knew but little, and that little did not invite further intimacy. Of book knowledge, he had none. With difficulty he could scrawl his signature; estimate the probable catch of a season's fishing; and to a nicety, figure the profits at the close. Yet woe to him who attempted to trade on his incredulity or lack of worldly wisdom. He was justly accredited with being endowed with an uncommon amount of "horse sense." Instinct dominated his judgment, which seldom led him astray. He watched the retreating couple who had just declared war, and his customary expression of good nature gave place to one of perplexity.

"What be them two a doin' tergether?" he muttered. "They ain't no more like 'n a cat-rigged boat and a school o' porpose. Th' widder can't be settin' her cap fer thet duck! No, he ain't her kind. She's square's er brick, an' he—I don't like 'im, an' neither, do I believe, does th' widder. What be he a doin' 'ere so much?"

He mused awhile and rapped his forehead with the bony knuckles of his hand. This was a habit he often indulged in when worried:—affirming, and seriously, "thet it shook th' ideas up, and out of th' lot rattlin' round inside, he usually got one good one."

He waited silently for the settling process, then continued:

"Now, Mr. Gooddale Finton (Slack never could remember names) ef yer think yer kin ketch any fish in these parts, yer've got ter hev a dern sight better kind of bait 'n yer seem ter persess up ter now. What's all this ere talk of a war atween he and th' widder? Ef I thought"—an ominous scowl overspread his features, his eyes flashed and the lines about his mouth deepened. He thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his trousers, and kicked a tuft of grass into the air with his boot. This apparently eased his feelings, but his speech was ominously distinct as he continued: "Ef I thought,—but no, couldn't be, but ef it wer' so,—now I'll jest keep an eye on yer, Mr. Finton, an' satisfy myself ef what I think ye cum 'ere fer is so, er ef it isn't so. In other words, whether Slack's right or whether Slack's wrong. Ef Slack's wrong, then ther's no harm done, an' no one'll be th' wiser. Ef Slack's right—" he whistled softly, and sent another tuft of grass into the air, "well, ef I'm right, I'll give yer a duckin' in th' bay 'n' a thunderin' good thrashin' ter boot."

“Slack Dorkins!”

Slack's chuckle emphasized the delight that shone in his eyes. He had never yet refused to answer that call. His hand instinctively flew to his hair. He grinned complacently and entered the house.

CHAPTER IV

“MY LOVE, MY ONLY LOVE, MY WIFE!”

I loved!

’Twas as awakening from a sleep, a dream.
For ages had the darkness of the blind
Encompassed me. The glories of the world—
The sun, the moon, the stars, I had not known;
Nor felt the pulses quicken as the new
Morn incense steals with magic charm o’er land
And sea, and speak of God in voice that fills
The heart and brain with thrills of ecstasy.

“MY life,” Featherly was saying, “has been no better than the average young man who finds himself with much money and time at his command.”

He was leaning over the arm of the rustic bench on which Hester was sitting. Quiet reigned, for the guests had gone, and Featherly’s aunt and Millie were alone in the house. The evening breezes sighed amorously, and died into soft whispers, for Love was abroad. Into Hester’s cheeks had crept a truant blush, that deepened till it put to shame the late roses climbing over a trellis near at hand.

“You know what I would say, Hester—if I could, if I dared. My love has made a coward of me. I came here old in knowledge of the

world's ways, to find that I did not know what life was. You know I love you, Hester."

He tried to look into her eyes, but her glance was fixed on the leaves she was fashioning into a rustic wreath.

Age, somehow, is no respecter of the fiery passion that sets aflame the hearts and the cheeks of young lovers. Judgment grows mature as passion and youth dies; and the grosser things of life, that respect not love's young dream, take possession of our latter years. Featherly's aunt stepped briskly on to the portico. The goddess of passion fled in dismay before this calm, debonair, little woman, and she was in command of the field.

Blue eyes that seemed faded through excess of kindness; soft lips, and a gentle expression of features—suggesting a living interrogation, which asked almost audibly if you were entirely comfortable, or if she could in any way add to your happiness; a gentle voice that reminded you of the fairy godmother of your youthful imaginations; a dapper little figure crowned with wavy white hair and adorned with the daintiest bit of white lace that ever woman wore—such was Aunt Carry. The spirit of youth enveloped her—for her step was light, and her heart was yet in the domain of childhood. She had found nothing but good in the world—for she had looked for nothing else. To be mortal, she must have, at least, one failing—she loved her nephew with a

love that could not admit that in him, fault existed. But, somehow, even for that you loved her the more.

“Tell me,” she asked cheerily as she approached, “*what* are you young people discussing so earnestly?”

Featherly loved his aunt—he loved her tenderly; but he said something under his breath that did not imply affection. Then aloud:

“Nothing of consequence, Auntie dear.”

“Of no moment, I assure you. Sit here, Aunt Carry,” Hester said. She directed a laughing glance at Featherly. He did not seem to enter into the humor of the situation.

“Ah,” smiled Aunt Carry, “you were just exchanging courtesies, not confidences. You young people are too circumspect, by far.” Then with a doubting glance, “I begin to think you were talking about something.”

“Auntie, dear,” began Featherly in a conciliatory tone, “I was just saying——”

“No matter what you were just saying, *I* say that I want you to go to the village, and get me three skeins of embroidery silk to match *that*.” She forced a piece of colored cloth into Featherly’s hand.

“But Aunty——”

“Don’t auntie me, but go,” was her uncomfoting reply.

“But Slack,” protested the young man, “he’ll go.”

"He most surely would, were he here and I should ask him. But I wouldn't. You'll go."

Featherly was forced to surrender. He nervously tried to catch Hester's eye and lingered, now in front, and now behind the seat, in vain attempts to exchange a look or gesture,—an unspoken word of love; but Aunt Carry's vigilance intervened. She talked to Hester but she looked at her nephew. She was slow to understand his attempts to enlist Hester's attention; but she was quick to perceive that he was loth to leave. Hester listened with interest to Aunt Carry, for they were fond of each other; but her color heightened with the knowledge that Featherly was making desperate efforts to meet her glance. Aunt Carry looked up quickly. His eyes were fixed on Hester's face, which was assuming a dull scarlet hue. For that one instant to him, in all the world, she alone existed.

"Not gone yet?" queried Aunt Carry.

"No, just going," he replied. "I was waiting—that is,—I was just about to start——"

"Well do," she caustically replied, "I will entertain Hester with little nothings while you are gone."

"Thanks, Auntie dear. So kind of you. I'm off!"

"Dear me!" she said, after he had gone, "that boy is a constant trial."

Hester looked in the direction Featherly had taken. He was standing on the crest of the hill,

from where he telegraphed back hundred word messages with his hands and arms.

“Hester dear,” said Aunt Carry, “I dread to think of the time when Ralph will consider marriage. You cannot realize how it troubles me. My brother’s second marriage was unfortunate. Why is it,” she continued in a tone which invites the confidences that women of kindred likes or interests indulge in, “how is it that a woman can be so utterly devoid of feeling and the instincts that should dominate a wife that they wilfully wreck a man’s happiness. My brother’s first marriage was childless. His second wife was younger than he by many years. Hester, dear, you can guess the rest—a life of dissension, then dishonor. A separation followed, and my brother lives alone for, as you know, Ralph lives with me. My brother’s life is embittered—ruined; and he has one fear, one dread always with him—that Ralph will marry. It would mean my brother’s death, for since his own unfortunate experience, he has become a confirmed recluse—his one interest, his one hope, Ralph. Thank God, that the boy is heart free.” She mused a while, then continued, unconscious what her words meant to her listener. Not a muscle of Hester’s face betrayed her. Her breathing was measured but deep; her color came and went; but other evidence of emotion she suppressed.

“I cannot blame him,” Aunt Carry resumed, “for Ralph’s love is all that is left to him in life.

I tell you this, dear, because I have heard you speak much of your father; and I know were he alive to-day that he would be first in your affection, and that you would long consider taking a step which would shake his trust in you."

Hester rose. Her face was pale and, as she leaned against the bench, Aunt Carry looked at her with concern.

"Are you ill, Hester?"

"No," she replied. "Continue, I am listening." It was with an effort that she steadied her voice.

"Ralph is aware of his father's wishes," Aunt Carry sorrowfully resumed. "I know that I am foolishly alarmed, but"—she took Hester's hand in hers—"you are one in thousands, in goodness of heart, in judgment. I feel at times as though I must talk to some one. I can trust you, dear. I have a mother's interest in Ralph. He is not my brother's child—he is a son by adoption."

Hester started, but did not speak. Aunt Carry again took up her story.

"An estrangement between them would mean a disclosure; hence you can readily appreciate my fears."

While her companion in a gentle voice related the facts that had cost her brother's happiness, Hester's thoughts were of her own father—his untiring devotion, his love, and the life that he had given to her own and her sister's education and advancement. Unconsciously she shuddered

as the thought presented what his feelings would have been had any act of hers during his life interrupted his perfect trust in her. The question of her future now rose before her, for she must answer her lover—but that answer she had already determined on. No thought of herself did she entertain. Her duty seemed clear, and, though with her decision came the knowledge that she must be false to her instinct of truth, yet her sense of right decided the course that she would pursue. But she was human, and her lover's words rang in her ears; and she could still feel the touch of his hand that had sent the blood rioting through her veins.

With springing step, Featherly came up the path from the village.

“Here, Aunty,” he said, “is the silk; and if you love me, never send me again to buy thread. They asked me if it were to mend a broken heart, and then laughed me out of the store.”

“There, there, Ralph, you will survive it. You may now continue your little nothings with Hester.”

She entered the house, and Hester rose to follow her. As she was about to pass Featherly, he took her hand in his.

“You are not going, Hester,” he said, with a show of confusion. “You will hear what I was about to say when my aunt interrupted.”

“I will remain if you wish it.”

He looked at her eagerly—doubt and fear in

his looks, in his bearing, in the tones of his voice. He could not understand the change that had come over her—her indifference, her coldness. Her manner spoke not of love; and with a show of patient interest and a reserved calm she waited for him to speak. Her face was impassive, and she met his gaze with a frankness which disarmed him.

“Hester,” he said in a passionate voice, “surely I had a right to believe—”

“Little nothings,” she laughed gayly. “Do be sensible, Ralph. Remember that a summer’s love blooms yearly. It dies before frost time. Dear me! You young men are as impressionable as a schoolgirl. Let us talk of something else.”

Excitement had given added brilliancy to her eyes. There was an unnaturalness to her gayety; but her lover’s discernment was blunted by the surprise that filled him. Her words he believed, for in her eyes was tantalizing mirth—assumed, true, yet to him, at that moment, deadly real.

“Did then the little nothings,” he said in a broken voice, “mean everything to me and nothing to you? Was I mistaken in believing that you cared for me? Did your looks, your words mean pity—not love?”

He laughed, but it was not pleasant to hear. At that moment had he looked at her, he would have seen that she was deeply moved. With an effort she controlled her voice.

“Now seriously—”

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“Don’t,” he interrupted almost savagely.

“You must hear me!” her voice was tremulous. “We have known each other but a few months. I would not intentionally mislead you—I would not. I am sorry I—”

Again he laughed. It grated on her hearing, for there was no joy in the sound. He looked out over the green fields, and the daisies and wild flowers nodded derisively in the summer breeze. The bees were singing their work-a-day song in the trellis beside the porch, and in the hush of early evening Hester’s heart-beats became almost audible.

“I do not blame you, Hester,” he said sadly. “After all, the Featherly fortune in love is still with me. Like a vagrant flower, it is born only to be crushed by a human foot. Yet I had hoped that in the wilderness of an almost aimless life, a hand had been stretched out to me. Poor fool! My father is not far wrong. All of which,” he said, turning to her with an attempt to smile, “goes to prove that a Featherly should not love. *Voilà, c’est tout!*”

Hester’s effort at self control was almost superhuman; but the reference to his father stung her to the quick. While she believed her lover,—even in thought,—did not associate her with the woman who had deceived his father, his reference to her aroused her pride, and her voice was unguarded as she answered: “Your father was wronged—deceived. I do not blame him—”

He looked at her with questioning eyes. She flushed guiltily, for her ardor had betrayed her.

"Hester," he said, "My aunt has told you. Has the knowledge influenced your answer to me? Could you—would your answer have been different—"

He looked at her fixedly for some moments. She could not meet his eyes, and the blood danced to her neck and cheek. The silence confused her the more. She looked up into his face and waited for him to continue.

"What has my aunt said to you?" He had, in a degree, recovered his calmness, and his tone was natural.

"Ralph," she said, "were my father alive to-day and his desire was that I should not marry, I would respect his wishes. His love for my sister and myself was almost pathetic in its perfect trust. Neither would I have considered a love that would ask me to turn from so plain a duty. Your father's wishes should be respected—"

"Hester," he said,—there was tenderness in his voice,—“look at me.”

She raised her eyes, but they fell before his impassioned glance.

"Tell me, Hester, that you love me."

She did not answer, but he held her close. He kissed her hair, her cheek, her lips. Her color, in waves, came and went, diffusing over neck and cheeks. She tried to free herself, to protest, to beg; but he kissed the words from her lips.

“Hester, my love,” he said, while he held her face so close that his breath fanned her cheek, “if you had succeeded in deceiving me, do you know what it would have meant to me—to my future? I came here with a taint in me of the world’s bitterness. I was floundering in a sea of unrest, whose shores were strewn with the dead leaves of unbelief, and the wreck of hopes that had come to naught. My faith in womankind was not profound, Hester love, for life, as I have seen it, breeds not respect. Here, I was made ashamed, for the life atmosphere was clear; and I received my first baptism in the realm of a pure life. At first I was afraid, for your eyes seemed to look through me and into my ill-spent past, and now—now our future opens with a promise of life, of love.”

“But your father?” she faltered. “I must not—I will not consent to come between you. No,” she insisted as he was about to interrupt her, “we must consider your father’s happiness as well as our own. I know his wishes. I shall respect them; for he has suffered enough. We are young—we can wait.”

He laughed softly.

“Can the flower ask the glacier that creeps to the sea to wait upon its blooming? Can the homing dove be stayed in its flight? My heart has found its resting place. Have I not waited?” He checked her interruption with his cheek to hers. “Besides, love, you do not know my fa-

ther. What my aunt has told you is true; but I shall tell him all and he will consent."

With an effort she freed herself and stood before him. Tenderness, love, was in her eyes, but there was also dread. A quiet determination,—a fixity of purpose, dominated her. There was character in the very poise of her head,—a self confidence, coupled with a clearly defined purpose.

"Ralph, dear, should I consent to our marriage during your father's lifetime, I would feel that my father's teachings had been forgotten. We must wait, love."

Sally Pitts approached with an air of importance. Her mission was not long in doubt. She handed Featherly a telegram, and looked on in breathless wonder while he read it. He turned to Hester.

"It is from my father. He desires me to come to New York without delay, to consult me on important business matters."

"Sally," said Hester, "I will fit on your new dress before it is time for you to return home."

Sally entered the house and Hester turned to Featherly.

"You will go?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered, "I must." He paused. Then: "and when I return it will be to my—to my wife."

She cast a startled look at him. To question

him or reply was made impossible by the returning guests, who were chattering with magpie volubility. Their voices gladdened their own ears; nor did the supper that was waiting them lessen their good-nature. In the kitchen, Millie confided to the singing tea kettle, which was bubbling with content, that “they were a set of giddy, little fools.” Then she forgot her disdain for the frivolous mortals for so long as it took her to serve them for the second time with snow pudding. “There is one consolation,” she said as she returned to the kitchen, “their appetites are good, and while they eat, they can’t talk.”

The dusk of evening was wooing the night, and Hester and Featherly walked slowly along the beach. They were alone, and only the sea was witness to Featherly’s earnest, impassioned plea.

“The Rev. Dr. Coulton I can trust,” he was saying, “we were school fellows. I may add that I made it possible for him to continue his studies. I can count on his secrecy.”

Hester’s answer was almost inaudible. She begged that their marriage be put off indefinitely. She pointed out the possibility of discovery, and dwelt upon his father’s anger and the possible rupture in their relations; but her pleadings were met by her lover with his gentle but firmly expressed resolve for their immediate marriage, or a confession to his father and appeal for his consent.

Hester made a last effort, but his arms were about her in a passionate embrace.

“My wife.” He sighed the words and the sea was witness to his vow—“my love, my only love, my wife.”

CHAPTER V

A SECRET THAT A LITTLE CHILD CAN KEEP

The ways of Heaven past finding are,
'Tis the steady gleam of the pale north star,
Directs the course of the mariner gray;—
O'er the watery waste points out the way.
And a little child empowered may be,
To make or mar life's destiny.

SALLY PITTS, after much thought, arrived at a conclusion,—she had been forgotten. But far from being cast down, or resenting the oversight, she kissed Millie good-night, and, bent on departing in a halo of good nature, sought the one, who, above all others, was her confidante and ally—Slack. She did not have far to go to find him. The fisherman's quarters were in the rear of the house, and there she discovered the object of her search.

Slack's shanty represented a porter's lodge, overseer's headquarters, manager's office, and fisherman's storehouse combined. It differed in one essential from the ordinary fisherman's shanty. In one corner of the room, which embraced the whole of the ground floor of the building, instead of the regulation "bunk", stood an iron bed covered with a white spread and linen of

fine texture, spotlessly clean, and arranged with a woman's skill. In Slack's absence the work was performed, and no protest on his part, "that she needn't be so dern 'ticular," dissuaded Millie from her systematic methods. The bed was, however, a constant reminder to the occupant of the room of order and cleanliness; and it stood apart, a mute protest to the general disorder that pervaded the room. Fishing nets, rowlocks, oars, torn pieces of canvas, sails, a full rigged miniature ship—Slack's handiwork,—fowling pieces and parts of a boat's rigging, were strewn in disorder about the floor, or hung in remnants from the walls and ceiling. On the table was an assortment of pipes of varying ages and styles, from a clay to a beautiful meerschaum, undergoing the delicate process of coloring. On the walls, not given over to the accumulation of years and dust, were tacked the portraits of the pugilistic celebrities of the day. These, to Millie, were an offence against decency, and a never failing cause for complaint. "What do yer know about them critters?" she would scornfully demand, "yer never see one of 'em in yer life; an' as fer fightin'—yer'd run ef one uv 'em looked at yer." To which pleasantries the fisherman smiled complacently, and replied that "he guessed he would." But among the periodicals scattered around the room was one devoted to sport; and among Slack's confidantes it was known that his secret visits to Portland and

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Boston always occurred when an exhibition of the fistic fraternity was announced in either city. Of the object of these little excursions Slack maintained a discreet silence; and the addition of new photographs to the collection which adorned the walls, passed unnoticed by the outraged Millie.

Sally discovered her champion seated by the open window, smoking.

"Good-night, Slacky," she said as she approached.

Slack took the pipe that he was smoking in his hand, "Yer ain't goin' air yer?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm goin'."

"But it's early," protested Slack.

"O, my no! It's after eight!"

"Be it?" Then with a laugh: "I know why yer goin' so soon,—yer afeered. Wan' me ter go down th' hill with yer?" he asked.

A long drawn out "no" denied the imputation of fear.

"Sally, yer be a regular tom-boy, and a night owl ter boot."

"Isn't that funny?" she laughed, "that's just what Dad says." Then in a stage whisper; "Yer don't know what Millie said about you to-night."

Slack's interest was deep and pronounced. He hitched his chair forward. "What did she say?" he asked. His tone of interest was unguarded.

Now Sally, woman-like, knew that her in-

formation would lose nothing of its importance by delay. She naively demanded conditions.

"You won't tell?"

"Honor bright!" vowed Slack.

"O, it's too funny!" She wished to enjoy her superior knowledge before divulging this choice morsel. She was aware that her companion was burning with impatience.

"Well, Sally, what be it?" Slack again asked.

"She said—"

"Yes."

"She said—you're sure you won't tell?"

"No."

"Well, you see I told Millie you were awful good—"

"Did yer? What'd she say?"

"She said—O, I know you'll tell Aunt Millie." Certainly it was worth a little more suspense. She laughed softly and put her arm around the fisherman's neck, then continued: "She said she thought so too. There, what do you think of that?" She stepped back that she might better observe the face of her listener.

"She didn't!" he exclaimed rapturously.

"Yes she did, but that wasn't all she said."

"No?" he exclaimed gleefully. A look of supreme joy overspread his features. He gave his chair another hitch forward. "What else?" he asked.

Sally laughed, and in a mysterious whisper answered:

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"She said that of all men you were the slackest."

"Yes," drawled Slack with mournful conviction, "'pears ter me I've heered thet before."

"Never mind," laughed the child, "Millie loves you and I love you, and we all love you." And with this declaration of universal good feeling she was off.

Slack sat in deep meditation until the night was far advanced. He had seen Hester and Featherly leave the house and go in the direction of the village. This, in itself, however, was a common occurrence. For the past few months, they had devoted much of their time to each other's society; and they often walked in the early evening to the village, or along the beach at the foot of the bluff. Not only was their intimacy a subject of remark by the members of the Blair family, but was also a topic of gossip in the village.

Slack felt keenly for John, whom he had known since boyhood; and, realizing the depth of his love for Hester, he knew the blow the young lover was about to receive would strike deep.

Hester's daily intercourse with Featherly would lead to an estrangement between John and herself. The fisherman's keen, watchful eye had not failed to discover on Hester's part an unconscious formality in her treatment of John, which was in marked contrast with their former relations. That John did not fail to notice the

change in her, and realize its import, he was satisfied. He saw it in his face, but by neither word nor action did John betray his feeling; although with him, doubt was becoming a certainty; and the future he had lived for had vanished. Yet deeply as he felt for the young lover, much as he desired the fulfilment of what he had always looked upon as a foregone conclusion—John's marriage with Hester—he was powerless to interfere. He mentally counted the weeks and the days until the end of the summer season, with the hope that with the departure of Featherly, normal conditions would be resumed, and Hester and John be reunited. With these thoughts in his mind he sauntered leisurely toward the house.

Sally, meanwhile, was walking idly along the village street, wholly unconscious of earthly things, and wondering if it were true that people lived in the stars; and if heaven were really so beautiful, why people should be afraid to die. These were odd fancies for one of her age to indulge in; but Sally was an uncommon child. She was given to vague, fantastic ideas, and they found many and varied forms of expression. Loneliness appealed to her, and heightened her imagination. Instead of seeking associates of her own age, she was much with those older than herself. She would roam about the village at night, and from choice, at the most unusual hours and places. The village church was one of her favorite haunts,

and here her father often found her sitting alone,—often in total darkness. She knew no fear, and the quiet solemnity of the church, the soft moonlight struggling through the stained glass windows, and the air of mysterious quiet, at once soothed her, and gave added life and zest to her vivid, childish imagination. She could not explain the desire that led her to visit the draughty, barren little chapel, other than that she thought and saw beautiful things; and wondered that her listeners could not enter into this unknown world with her. As she neared the church on her way home, she could not resist the temptation to enter. A light was burning in the vestry at the far end of the church. No one was to be seen, although she heard the rear door close and the sound of footsteps on the board walk that led to the parsonage. It was not quite dark in the church, for an oil lamp in the vestry threw a faint, sickly light, that died in vaulted space.

Sally seated herself near the door, and the high backs of the pews almost hid her from view. She watched the flickering light, and wondered why it was there; and wished that someone would remove it, as she would rather be in the dark.

The entrance of the Rev. Dr. Coulton interrupted her conjectures. He seemed nervous and preoccupied; opened the door many times and looked out expectantly; then, arranging the writing materials on the table, nervously fingered his watch.

He was a man with an almost melancholy countenance, scholarly in appearance, and had the manner of one who regards life seriously. He had lent himself to the marriage, asking no questions, and with entire confidence in the man who had befriended him.

Hester and Featherly entered by the front door and stood directly opposite Sally.

"No," Featherly was saying, "it is safer than to go to the parsonage; besides it is dark."

"This secrecy unnerves me," Hester replied. "It is as though we were running away."

"Courage, Hester dear," replied Featherly, "it will soon be over. A few minutes only and we shall be man and wife. Come, they are waiting."

They walked down the aisle of the church. The minister greeted them at the door of the vestry.

"The witnesses?" demanded Featherly.

"Are in the parsonage," replied the minister. "I will call them."

Sally crouched in the corner of the pew, her eyes bulging from their sockets. Was this real? Were they living personages? Yes, it was Hester's voice; she was equally certain of Featherly. Married! She whispered the word cautiously. The sound of her voice filled her with terror. She feared to breathe, and her heart beat until she felt she should scream. She placed her hand over her mouth, and with a determined effort tried to think; but the enormity of the whole proceeding



“At length the import of what was taking place began to dawn upon her.”



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filled her with inexpressible confusion; and she gave herself up to watching what was taking place. What if she should sneeze and betray herself? They would never believe she was there by accident. Holding her hand more tightly over her mouth, she listened to the Rev. Dr. Coulton as he read the marriage service.

At length the import of what was taking place began to dawn upon her. Hester married and to Mr. Featherly! John! She almost spoke the word aloud. Since she could remember, the names, John and Hester, had been associated. She knew, as everyone in the village knew, that they had been lovers since childhood. But what did all this mean? She was half inclined to doubt her senses. She had often imagined strange things when she was alone in the church, especially at night: had seen people coming and going: heard strange music; and saw beautiful faces when the moon shone through the colored glass. But no. By the lamp-light that shed a faint gleam over those at the end of the church, she saw Hester and Featherly write something in a book; saw the minister give a folded paper to Hester; saw two men go out through the side door, and the Rev. Dr. Coulton hold the lamp high in the air to light Hester and Featherly to the door. Sally waited in an ecstasy of fear for them to pass out. If she could control herself for one minute longer, she would be safe.

They halted in front of where the child was

sitting, and Featherly placed a cloak over Hester's shoulders.

"Hester, love, are you happy?" he asked.

"So happy!" she replied, "but——"

"If it will add one degree to your happiness I will tell my father all. I know he will forgive us."

"No," she answered in a tone of dread. "I have made a vow that during your father's lifetime, I will not disclose our marriage. Promise that you will keep it with me."

The intensity of her tone, he attributed to her nervousness.

"I will," he answered solemnly.

As they turned to leave the church, the neatly folded paper given Hester by the minister, dropped to the floor.

Sally was on the point of exclaiming, but controlled herself, and the door closed upon them. The light disappeared, and the minister's footsteps on the board walk died in soft echoes.

It was some minutes before Sally dared breathe naturally; and a longer time before she moved from her cramped position. She did not dread the darkness, but the awful secret which had been forced upon her, filled her with terror. A half hour previous what had been rows of straight-backed seats, plain gloomy walls, lonely and desolate in appearance, prosaic to a degree, but having certain fascinations to the little dreamer, now seemed peopled with numberless conspira-

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tors, of whom she was the leader. The rustle of her dress, when she moved, made her start in terror; and fear that was new and strange, took possession of her. She thought she heard voices, and was preparing to leave, but she could not muster up courage to move. A night bird fluttered against the window and she crouched in fright at the sound. The clock in the belfry struck the hour and reverberated through the empty church in unearthly sounds. It seemed to her that it would never cease striking. She had often listened to it with pleasure, but now its brazen tones kept ringing in her ears.

The remembrance of the paper which Hester had dropped, aroused her, and with trembling fingers she groped about on the floor to find it. Yes, it was there. She grasped it tightly in her hand and crept cautiously to the door. Once outside, her courage returned and she hastened homeward. Should she give it to Hester? They would never believe she was in the church by accident. No, she would keep it, and perhaps Hester would tell her that she had lost it, and then—well then she'd disclose how she came to find it.

Fear not, Hester. The ways of Providence are past all finding. It has given your secret into the keeping of a little child. She will fulfil the trust.

CHAPTER VI

“HO, SLACKY! YER DON’T SAY YER START
TERMORRER?”

As this ’ere’s a time momentious, we’ll not be at all contentious,

Will yer kindly tell us, Slacky, if yer mean jest what yer say?

Ef yer truly air a goin’, why er course we don’t mind knowin’;

Though yer might er told us, Hiram, all about it afore to-day.

THE neutral ground where all questions of private or public interest were discussed with reckless freedom, was the village store. Here, after a summer’s work, the fishermen were wont to congregate and exchange the gossip of the country. Naturally, the summer visitors received due attention, and many were the gibes and coarse jokes indulged in at their expense. The affairs and happenings of the past summer were gone into in all their different aspects, and the shortcomings of all were touched upon with pitying scorn. Throughout the winter the discussion went on, and spring found the contestants arrayed,—some on one side, some on the other, each upholding the views he entertained the previous fall, their opinions divided by a gulf

as wide and deep as the sea they fished. They were a people of strong convictions, slow temper, superstitious to a degree, and with a moral standard as rigid as their minds were narrow.

On a rainy night in September an unusual number were assembled in the store, seated on kegs and barrels, or lounging against the counter. A fire in a large iron stove glowed cheerily; for there was a damp chill in the air, and an oil lamp sputtered dimly through the smoke-laden air. Captain Edwards spat on the floor, and addressed his listeners generally.

“Tell ’em,” he exclaimed, “yer kin tell ’em same’s yer kin tell a mess o’ fish,—by looking ’em over. Ef they be a good lot they show it, and contry-wise.”

“This year’s crop’s a pretty scaly mess, I call ’em,” Seth Binks rejoined.

Fortune had not smiled on Binks the past few months, and his opinion of the departing visitors was tempered by a lean purse.

“O, ther wern’t so bad,” exclaimed Portugese Joe, “I managed ter charge ’em double price most er th’ time. I can’t complain.”

“Huh!” drawled Seth, “you’d wring money out of a jellyfish.”

“Well,” droned Joe, “thet’s what they came ’ere fer—ter spend money. I did th’ best I could ter help ’em.” With a chuckle he continued: “Yer know thet feller as stayed at th’ hotel? What’s his name? Him as wore his pant-legs

rolled up, an' talked about th' glorious sea an' all thet balderdash."

"O, you mean Mr. Redfern," answered Seth.

"Yes, thet's 'em," exclaimed Joe. "Well, he'd been er botherin' me all summer, an' I was good an' sick er 'im; an' th' last week he wer' 'er, I thought er little taste er th' glorious sea wouldn't be such a bad thing fer 'im arter all. I weighted th' rudder uv my boat with lead, an' rigged it so's it would sink when I let 'er go. O, I hed 'er fastened with ropes! I'm not losin' rudders fer 'im. A stiff breeze wer' blowin' an' a bit ef a sea was on, and when I hed 'im outside, I jest put her up ter th' wind an' let th' rudder go. I yelled ter 'im: th' rudder's gone! Well thet feller turned a pale green. We wer' shippin' water in sheets an' buckets full, and I hollered ter 'im ter bail fer his life. Ha, ha, ha," roared Joe, "yer shud er seen thet landlubber work! In two minutes he wer' wet ter th' skin. I kep' 'im at it fer nigh on ter half an hour with th' boat up ter th' wind. Gum! wasn't he a sight! When I thought he hed 'nough uv th' glorious sea, I diskevered thet I could steer with an oar. I brought 'im in, an' he fell on my neck thankin' me fer saving his life. I hev his picture thet he give me ter remember 'im by. Ha, ha, ha," laughed Joe, "them's th' kind!"

The roar that rewarded Joe's narrative was interrupted by Captain Edwards.

"They do make yer laugh," he said, "with

their yachtin' clo'se 'n cheap airs. They don't know 'nough ter bait er hook, an' es fer runnin' a boat,—ef I couldn't swim, I wouldn't trust myself in a boat with one of 'em in more'n three foot er water. But I must 'low thet th' widder——”

Boisterous laughter greeted his allusion to Mrs. Pendleton.

“Better not let th' Commodore hear yer speak of th' widder,” yelled Joe.

“Th' captain wer' her last victim,” Seth cried.

“Well,” broke in the captain, “I will say——”

“O, course yer will. Yer'll swear ter it ef th' widder's consarned,” interrupted a voice.

“Don't flatter yerself, Captain,” cried another, “yer only th' tenth. There be others!”

“Now,” interrupted th captain, “ef yer'll hold yer yop, I was about ter say thet th' widder was th' senseblest one of the whole lot.”

“Yes, an' th' best lookin’,” declared Joe, “right yer air, Captain, we don' blame yer a dern bit; but O my! don't let th' Commodore git on ter yer.”

A cross fire of desultory remarks was indulged in for some moments. Taking his pipe from his mouth, Seth Binks spoke:

“What puzzled me was why this yer Fenton stayed round here so long?”

“Well,” drawled Joe, with the conscious air of a man who has something to tell of more than ordinary interest, “p'r'aps now thet they're all gone, I can enlighten yer.”

A hush of expectancy settled on the group. Joe continued:

"I was a corkin' my dory one arternoon on the wharf what's used for a landing place." A comprehensive nod swept the group. "Yer see, thet dory wer' behind er pile er empty barrels, an' yer couldn't see her. I was workin' away, an' I sees this yer Fenton comin' 'long in thet steam launch er his, an' he lands on th' wharf. Jest as he do, I hear a step comin' down th' wharf, an' I could see Slack standin' right in front er Fenton, though neither one uv 'em could see me. Slack sez, 'Mr. Fenton, I'd like er word with yer.' With thet, Fenton looked Slack over scornful like, an' sez, 'be brief my man,' er hurry up, er somethin'. Then Slack nearly took the wind outer my sails, he sez: 'Yer come up ter th' Blair farm pretty often er late. What d'yer come fer?' Then Fenton began ter take some interest. He said ter Slack, 'What's this damn impertinence?' 'Damn impertinence er no,' Slack sez, 'I ast yer a civil question an' I want a civil answer.' 'Who in hell be yer?' ast Fenton. 'I have a right ter ask,' Slack sez, 'an' I tell yer agin, I want ter know what brings yer ther' so often?' They stood pretty nigh together. Fenton was smokin' a cigarette. He tuck it outer his mouth, an' whether or no he meant ter, I can' say, but th' smoke puffed inter Slacky's face. Now ef ther's one thing Slacky *don't* like it's cig'rette smoke, an' what d'yer think he did? He

just knocked the dum thing out er Fenton's hand inter th' water. Fenton made as if to raise his fist ter strike. Slacky sez—you know his drawl—O, it wer' beautiful! He sez quiet like, yer know—” Joe looked around. His listeners to a man nodded assent. “Jest look out when yer hear it: thet's all I've got ter say. Slacky sez, ‘I wouldn't do thet ef I wer' you.’ Then Fenton sez, an' he was jest bilin' mad, ‘stand aside.’ Yer see th' barrels tuck up th' hull o' th' wharf an' Fenton couldn't pass Slacky. Well, Slacky sez—an' yer could put one o' them barrels atween each word they wer' so slow an' soft like,—‘easy er minute! I want ter say ter yer, thet I don't want yer ter go up ter th' house any more, an' thet settles it. Now think it over, Mr. Fenton, think it over. Personally, I think yer a damn rascal, an' ef yer *do* go ther' again—well, we'll settle thet th' next time we meet, an' it 'll be damn soon arter.’ With thet shot Slacky stepped ter one side, and Fenton walked away an' yer shud er heered 'im cuss.”

“What's Slacky got agin Fenton?” demanded Binks.

Joe meditated before replying, “Well, I s'pose everyone knowed that he'd tried ter ketch onto one er th' gals. What I jest tole yer took place afore Hessie went ter New York ter live.”

“She be a teachin' music ther', ain't she?” asked one of the fishermen.

“Yes,” answered Joe, “so they say.”

"Thet's not all they say," one of the fishermen rejoined.

Sam Pitts had been a silent listener all the evening. Ordinarily of a taciturn disposition, he rarely entered into their discussions or arguments. At the last remark, he turned quickly, and confronted the speaker with flashing eyes. He was not easily aroused to anger, but when crossed was a most formidable adversary, and was shunned by the fishermen because of his violent temper. A change had, however, come over Sam in the last few months, and those who knew him best could not explain it, or its cause. He had stopped drinking; treated Sally with tender consideration; and conducted himself in a manner unlike the Sam of the past few years. His reformation dated from an interview with Hester some months previous.

For the past month Hester had been living in New York. It was generally understood that she was earning her living teaching music: but the gossips in the village were busy with her name. The female portion of the community insisted that something was wrong; and wove a network of mystery about her manner of living. Sam had heard this gossip, and his old doggedness came to the surface.

"Yes," he exclaimed angrily, "they say mor' 'n ther prayers, damn 'em! It takes a woman ter ruin th' name er one of 'er kind. Ef it's not one, it's another: *now* it's Hessie. Their damn

lying tongues ought ter be pulled out by th' roots. I tell yer”—his hand came down on the counter with the force of a trip hammer and set the glasses on the shelves to jingling—“I tell yer a woman's th' fust cousin ter th' devil—leastwise one thet gossips is.”

No one in that gathering, even if they differed from Sam, cared to argue the point with him. After a moment's silence someone said:

“Where be Slacky these days?”

As if in answer to the question, the door opened, and Slack walked into the room.

“There,” exclaimed Joe, “talk about the devil—yer know th' rest uv it.”

“And he's sure ter appear,” continued Captain Edwards, “Slacky, how air yer?”

“O, middlin' good,” Slack replied. “What were you fellers sayin' about me?”

“Nothin' thet yer'd like ter hear, Slacky,” answered Joe with a laugh. “How be all the folks?”

“Pretty good,” answered Slack, “leastwise they were when I last heered. When I get ter New York, I'll let yer know more 'ticular.”

“When Slacky gets ter New York! ho, ho, ho, ho,” they roared, “when Slacky gets ter—ha, ha, ha, ter New York, he, he, he, an' goes sailing down th' Bowery, ha, ha, ha.”

Joe's voice evolved from the maelström of mirth provoking gibes.

“They won't do a thing ter 'im,” he shouted.

"Put up at the Waldorf-Asteria?" yelled a voice.

"Yer kin wear my silk tile," volunteered another, "they ketch chaps like you in a net. Ho, ho, ho, when der yer start?"

The answer fell from the lips of the unruffled Slack. "Termorrer."

Laughter gave place to consternation.

"What, yer don't mean—termor—no, yer jokin'!"

"Termorrer," repeated Slack blandly.

They were not wholly convinced; yet they knew Slack's manner of stating facts. They were non-plussed for the moment; and a hush settled on the assembly.

"Now Slack, none yer foolin'," broke in Joe. No one, however, knew better than Joe that Slack was in earnest. "Yer ain't jokin'?" Joe queried.

"No," came the laconic reply.

Consternation was stamped on every face. They looked into each other's eyes; then their gaze was fixed in a stare of incredulous wonder on the half-smiling countenance before them. Here was an event; a subject of discussion that would tax their best reasoning faculties for weeks, yes months to come. They quickly jumped to the conclusion that Slack's departure must have some connection with Hester. But what? That was the question they would be called upon to determine. For the present it was their plain

duty to draw from Slack some further information upon which to build their conjectural structures. Of ascertaining the plans or intentions of the wily Slack, they had but slight hopes. It was a delicate undertaking. Joe, with an insidious smile, began the attack.

“When be yer acomin’ back?”

“Dunno,” replied Slack with a smile.

Realizing the difficulty of ascertaining the truth, and the probable length of time necessary to draw Slack out, Joe changed his plan of procedure. Addressing the proprietor of the store, he said: “Bein’ this is a moment’us occasion, an’ not knowin’ when we are to see our friend Mr. Hiram Dorkins agin (even Slack started as his Christian name was uttered) yer might bring on some ole cider, Charley, an’ some crackers ’n cheese, an’ we’ll celebrate th’ event as it’s befitin’ we shud.”

When the cider had many times gone round, Joe assumed his sweetest smile and returned to the attack.

“Yer be comin’ back?”

“Mebby,” Slack’s tone of unconcern was maddening.

Joe gulped down half a tumblerful of cider. His eyes, over the top of the glass, measured Slack from top to toe. He met the glance with a look of childlike candor. Joe became desperate at his nonsuccess. He blurted out:

"Don't mean ter be inquisitive Slacky, but what yer goin' there fer?"

"Ter work," quietly answered Slack.

Emboldened by his success and the hard cider, Joe went a step further:

"What doin'?" he asked.

"D'n know."

"Well, yer know who yer goin' ter work fer?"

"Yaas," drawled Slack.

"Who?" queried Joe, leaning forward with ill-concealed interest.

"Well," replied Slack with an air of commiseration, "being considerate by nature, an' knowing yer pumping process must er fatigued yer, s'pose we wet up round with some er Charley's Pine Tree Champagney."

This suggestion was acted upon with alacrity. Joe's countenance wore a crest-fallen air:—his success so far was not pronounced. Slack could with difficulty suppress a smile. His nonchalant indifference, and the effect of the hard cider, was telling on his companions:—the one upon their patience; the other affecting their heads. When he thought their curiosity sufficiently aroused, and their thirst momentarily allayed, he spoke:

"Well, ef yer be interested in a little matter like my goin' ter New York, o'course I don't say yer be, but if yer *air*, an' I never expected yer'd care a fishhook one way or t'other, I don't mind tellin' yer, thet's 'lowin' yer'd care ter know——"

“O, come ter th’ pint!” Joe exclaimed impatiently, “come ter th’ pint!”

With an aggravating drawl Slack continued: “Joe, yer be th’ most impatient man I ever seed. You must understand thet patience’s a virtue, an’ yer’ll never hev a better time ter practise it then right now.” With laughing eyes but a placid face, he continued: “As yer done me th’ honor ter want ter know what I’m goin’ ter do in New York, I don’t mind tellin’ yer thet I’m goin’ ter work fer Mr. Featherly.”

If Slack had wished to create a sensation, the reception of this announcement must have gladdened his heart—the effect was instantaneous. The look of surprise stamped on every countenance, was followed by a consuming thirst, and to the last man, they drowned their chagrin at not having even guessed this remarkable state of affairs, in copious draughts. One of their number, overcome by the suddenness of the news or the age of the cider, rolled from his chair to the floor with an utter disregard of the eternal fitness of things.

A storm of questions followed with breathless rapidity, precluding any possibility of receiving individual response. They all talked at once; and by common consent and united action, strove to drown their consuming thirst and conflicting feelings of curiosity, chagrin, and the envy that burned within them, with the year-old cider.

They gave vent to their enthusiasm in characteristic and manifold ways; to the detriment of barrel-heads and various bits of crockery that rattled from the shelves, in response to the vociferous pounding on the counters, and the general upsetting of things. Between periods in the destruction—for the cider was getting in its work—they assured Slack that, “they knew dern well soon’s they heered Hessian’d gone ter New York as how he’d be agoin on ther.” To which intelligence the smiling Slack assured them “thet he was satisfied that they knew all about it; an’ thet’s why he hadn’t mentioned it before.” And they pounded the assurance; “thet they knowd it all ’long,” in lusty unison, till the glasses rattled protestingly and spilled some of the good cider abroad.

Someone discovered that the hour was late and the cider was strong,—for even cider has the power of asserting itself, and they took a deviating course to the door; but returned to drink Slack’s health for the twentieth time.

Slack assured them that he would, before his departure on the morrow, be pleased to see them all, individually and collectively, and shake them by the hand. “Not,” he added, “thet they cared a rap where he went er what he did, but it was a univusal custom.” Then, smiling sweetly, he drawled a “good-night,” and was gone.

Joe looked long and vacantly at the door that closed after the retreating Slack.

“Dern me,” he muttered, “but he’s aggravating!” Then with a mournful expression he continued, “an’ we never even ’spected it.”

Charley blew out the light as a gentle hint that it was closing-up time.

CHAPTER VII.

HESTER HEARS OF SLACK'S PLEASANTRIES WITH THE COACHMAN

New scenes, new friends! Think you they fill
The heart, the life, with the sweet thrill
Of long ago?
Can we replace the old with new?
Sweet memory rings the answer true:
No, no, ah, no.

IT was the early part of December. For two months Hester and Ralph Featherly had been living in New York City. Two months of happiness, marred only by the fear that their marriage might become known.

They paid for their happiness the price demanded by an exacting world—eternal vigilance. What first seemed to them an easy task, developed almost unsurmountable difficulties, that multiplied as time went by.

The first link in the chain of a double life was installing Hester in suitable quarters, but this was quickly overcome. Featherly was the owner of considerable residential property; and a cosy flat near his home was ready for Hester's occupancy when she arrived. It contained a studio suitable for a music teacher. This was to be the cloak on which they depended to cover the truth, and to appease the suspiciously inclined. Here

Featherly spent most of his time; and they were very happy.

This mode of life, however, was distasteful to Hester in the extreme. Deceit and double dealing were foreign to her nature; and the constant fear that their relations might be discovered, was a source of apprehension that fretted her nerves into a state of irritability.

But so perfect was her self-control, that Featherly was unconscious of the feeling of restlessness that possessed her. She never alluded to the dread of discovery that filled her waking hours, fearing that her husband, giving way to his impulsiveness, and to his desire to make her entirely happy, might confess their marriage to his father. Whatever slight hope she had entertained of the elder Featherly becoming reconciled to his adopted son's marriage, she was now satisfied that they were beyond the hope of forgiveness. It was not the rupture between father and son that she most feared; but the effect of the announcement on her husband that no tie of blood existed between them,—that he was a son only by adoption.

The elderly Featherly had, at the time of his second marriage, transferred large property interests to his adopted son. Time and judicious management had increased the value of this estate, until the younger Featherly was wealthy in his own right.

Slack had been for the last two months in

Featherly's employ. It was agreed, however, that he was to return to Norton in the spring. His true station was difficult to determine. At the office and at Featherly's house he was known as the "skipper," but, as his employer's yacht had been out of commission for some months, his duties were neither burdensome nor exacting. Featherly's determination to employ Slack, was not founded alone on personal regard for the brawny fisherman. It was Hester's complete confidence in Slack, and her affection for him, that prompted Featherly to make the proposition that the fisherman had accepted, and it was Slack's desire to be near Hester that induced him to leave Norton and make his home in New York. City life was distasteful to him. He was cramped by his surroundings, and ill at ease. But no word of complaint was heard. Smilingly complacent, he performed his duties—and his employer's ingenuity was taxed to invent them—with a fidelity and a tact that was as original as it was complete.

John Cary seldom saw Hester. For the past month he had been employed in fitting out a new boat for his uncle, which was nearing completion in one of the Maine shipyards. He made frequent visits to Norton, but these visits were productive of neither profit nor peace of mind; for the gossips of the village were busy with Hester's name, and he always came from there filled with resentful indignation.

Ethel was at a boarding school for the winter. Millie was in charge of the Blair home, and the time not occupied with the care of the house, was given over to fretful conjecture as to what Slack was doing: and when she had a listener, to the positive assertion that she knew something dreadful would happen to him, "in that dreadful place." And no assurance from her listeners that "Slacky'd come pretty nigh ter takin' care uv hisself," mollified her.

The pitfalls of a large city were dwelt upon;—the spinster's excited imagination inventing most horrible and unheard of temptations and dangers. "Why," she'd exclaim, "it ain't safe ter go out after dark, and yer know how terribly unsuspectin' Slacky be. He's as innercent as a child, an' as careless;" and she fretted the weeks away in ominous forebodings.

The subject of Millie's fears was, in the meantime, in his own peculiar way, acquiring knowledge of city life and of worldly ways at a rapid rate. Theatres, concert halls of various degrees of excellence and of no fixed moral standard, were visited by the doughty fisherman. "I'm here," he declared, "an' I'm goin' ter see th' hull show." Nor were these excursions always without incident. The stamp of his vocation was upon him; and his ambling gait, huge frame and uncouth manner, furnished amusement that he rather enjoyed than resented. Beyond that

point, however, it was not safe to tread; as a few broken heads bore evidence.

It was evening. Hester sat at the piano, and her hands strayed lightly over the keys, evoking a progression of harmonious chords from which a quaint melody was evolved.

Featherly entered softly and pressed his cheeks to hers.

"O!" she exclaimed, "you startled me."

"Did I?" he said. "Then I'll punish myself:—instead of two kisses I'll take but one."

"But why," asked Hester laughingly, "punish me? I'm not the offender, and the other kiss belongs to me."

"Here is a dilemma!" he exclaimed, "we'll have to put off the punishment indefinitely. Now little woman, I discovered a plaintive note in your playing. You've been thinking."

"Yes, Ralph dear, I was thinking how happy we'd be, if your father knew of our marriage, and was reconciled."

"Hester, love, I will tell him to-morrow. I know he'll forgive us."

"No," she declared in a determined tone. "It is too late. Besides, your promise."

"O, what a determined little puss you are," Featherly answered, "but, remember love, I have not exacted any such condition. Let it be as you say. Tell me, Hester love, are you happy?"

"Happy!" she replied, "yes, so happy that I fear to think——"

"What cause have you to fear? What can come between you and happiness?"

"I know Ralph, dear; but such a train of misfortunes followed our marriage: the death of your young friend, the curate, who performed the ceremony; the destruction of the parsonage and the church records by fire; the disappearance of the only witnesses; the loss of our marriage certificate——"

"Tut, tut, you are gloomy to-night," he laughed, "tell me, have you heard from home?"

"Yes," she replied sadly, "they believe me earning my living teaching music."

"That's too good!" he laughed, "but it's true, isn't it? Haven't you a studio? Don't you receive pupils? Am I not one of your pupils?" With the utmost seriousness he continued, "I don't know what you do with all the money you earn. O," he laughed, "it's too good!"

"I know love, but it's deception; and really at times I feel guilty——"

"You are guilty," he exclaimed embracing her, "not at times, but all the time—of being my wife, my lovely, lovable, loving wife. Do you know, Hester, when I go to my place of business, I open the desk in my private office, and inside I have—what do you think I have?"

"Papers?" she asked.

"No."

"Books?"

"No, your portrait! For no other eyes than

mine. And when I look at it, I say to an imaginary friend, my dear sir, allow me to present you to my wife; and I say it softly, again and again. Ah! but the portrait can't compare with the original!"

"Ralph dear, how foolish of you, and we have been married nearly four months."

"Foolish? I believe the world would consider me so; not for being in love; but for being in love with my own wife. It does seem strange in this age of divided devotion. But tell me, love, what did Millie say in the letter?"

Hester laughed softly. "To tell the truth," she answered, "her letter was mostly devoted to expressing her fears for Slack's safety."

Featherly laughed long and loud. Certain episodes concerning Slack had come to his knowledge; and they were of a character that dispelled any doubt of Slack's ability to take care of himself.

"Write to Aunt Millie," he said, "not to worry about Slack." Then in a reminiscent mood, he continued, "dear, tender hearted Millie; yet she withholds from Slack the word that would make him the happiest of mortals. Do you know, Hester, I have feasted on the best from Parisian cafes to the oriental restaurants of Hong Kong, and never found anything equal to Millie's pumpkin pies."

"Her cream biscuits!" Hester exclaimed.

"O, her cream biscuits! her jelly-rolls! How

did she make the jelly-rolls? Fit for the gods! And her roast chicken! Never was such roast chicken; and the dressing! Mystery of mysteries. Just enough sage, a dash of onion——”

“Yes,” interrupted Hester.

“But the plum-pudding——”

“Ah! the plum-pudding!”

“With real plums——”

“As large as that,” said Hester, holding up two, beautifully shaped fingers.

“Oh!” exclaimed Featherly.

“Ah!” rejoined Hester.

“Such pudding!”

“Such sauce!”

“Couldn't we have Millie send us a plum-pudding, Hester dear?”

“Why yes, love,” she answered.

“And when you write don't forget to ask her to send some biscuit.”

“Is that all, love?”

“Well,” he rejoined with a satisfied air, “that will do for the present.”

They fell to discussing their home life at Norton and were very happy. The light from a large piano lamp, softened by a Japanese shade, filled the room with a warm, yellow glow of color. Hester resumed her playing; and Featherly threw himself on the couch and listened to the soft harmonies that filled the room. She knew what appealed to him and played on and on; and he listened with contentment stamped on

his features. In the middle of a plaintive melody he burst into a loud laugh. Hester abruptly stopped playing and turned to him with:

"Why Ralph, what is it? I haven't laughed to-night. Pray don't keep it all to yourself."

For a moment, Featherly could not control himself, then spoke brokenly, laughing between each sentence.

"Hester, dear, I told you my coachman had left me."

"Yes," she answered.

"But I didn't tell you why he left."

"No."

"Well, I'd decided to say nothing about it, but Millie's letter and her fear for Slack is too much. You see, my former coachman, who is an Englishman with a very florid countenance, is conceited in the extreme. The first week after Slack's arrival he was at the house most of the time. I'm fond of Slack, and I like to have him with me to talk to. You understand?"

"Yes," smiled Hester.

"Well, the coachman, for some reason, did not take kindly to Slack, for as you know, when he arrived, he did not look what might be called city bred."

"No," laughed Hester, "he didn't."

"The coachman, who is a capable, though overbearing man, improved every opportunity to poke fun at Slack, assured him that it wouldn't be safe

to go out alone, and, emboldened by Slack's show of absorbing all the ridiculous advice he offered, became rather personal in his remarks. Slack stood his treatment for about a week. What followed I gathered from the footman. Slack refused to talk, and I couldn't believe Joseph, the coachman. The footman's version, to quote him as well as I'm able, was like this: 'I 'eered Joseph laughin' very loud, sir, and then I 'eered 'im a howlin' an' cryin' murder, an' I runs out sir, an' ther' wer' Mr. Dorkins a playin' foot-ball wi' Joseph; an' Joseph's nose was runnin' blood in a stream, sir. 'E tossed 'im about sir, as ef 'e wer' a tennis-ball, then 'eld 'is 'ead under the faucet till Joseph begged sir, thet's all I know sir!' Ha, ha, ha," laughed Featherly, "I believed every word of it when I saw Joseph three minutes after the set-to, for he was a sight to behold!"

Astonishment prevented Hester from replying for some seconds. "Slack!" she exclaimed. "It seems incredible! What did he say?"

"Told me he hadn't had so much fun since he had the measles." Featherly's laugh rang through the room.

"But you reprimanded him?" Hester's tone was severe.

"Em, well, you see, Joseph demanded Slack's discharge. I quietly explained to Joseph, that much as I felt inclined to grant his request, it was impossible, as Slack was a near connection;

and, that's how I lost my coachman. I then ordered Slack into the library——”

“Yes,” exclaimed Hester expectantly.

“And,” continued Featherly, “we drank a bottle of champagne together.”

“And you said nothing to him?”

“Only to drink his health,” he laughed, “Slack refused to talk of the encounter further than to say that ‘the lobster-faced Englishman was too dern easy!’”

“Ralph dear, you’ll spoil Slack!” Hester’s tone was reproachful.

“Hester love, believe me, Slack has long since passed the age when spoiling is possible. He is as well seasoned inside, as is his tough weather-beaten face. I have no better man in my employ:—no one whom I’d more readily trust to carry out an order, with absolute surety of its proper performance than Slack; allowing, of course, it were within the scope of his ability. As far as Joseph is concerned, he received his just deserts; and my regret in the matter,” he laughed, “is that I missed the fun.” Featherly received a reproving look that melted into a smile.

“Hester,” he said after a pause, “some of our friends are coming to call to-morrow evening, and Aunt Carry wants you to be present. Quite an informal little affair, music and tea——”

“Ralph,” she replied, “I dread——”

“Pooh!” he exclaimed, “you know them all, Mrs. Pendleton, Fenton and the rest.”

"Hester's face clouded. She disliked Fenton, and in a sense, feared him. She had met him at her husband's home; and his insinuating manner was particularly offensive to her. Often she had discovered his gaze fixed upon her; and her self-control had been taxed to its utmost. Her constant fear of discovery made her abnormally sensitive; and she imagined that he suspected her relations with Featherly. Another cause for anxiety, was her husband's unguarded manner towards herself when in the company of their friends. She had expostulated with him, but he always laughed at her fears, assuring her that she was needlessly alarmed. Hester had never spoken to her husband of her feelings toward Fenton; but she was ill at ease in his company, and avoided him as far as was possible, without giving actual offence.

"Of course, I will go if you wish it," she said, "but I almost dread meeting people; you are so—so——"

"Well," he interrupted, "I am so what?"

"Unguarded," she replied.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed, "Unguarded! Why I feel as if we were living in an atmosphere charged with treason; with plots for the overthrow of the existing form of government; and of designs against the lives of our friends. I have to weigh each word I utter, until I am actually contracting the stammering habit. I want to cry out our marriage from the housetops; in-

vite all our friends to witness our happiness, and
—and——”

“Ralph dear,” Hester interrupted, “it is ten
o’clock.”

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. PENDLETON: "AND THEY MADLY LOVE EACH OTHER!"

"And how they love! No voice, no tongue
Could tell the rapture that they know.
The dears! Ah, me! I too, was young;
And not so very long ago."

IT was early evening of the following day. Featherly and Dr. Raddy were seated in the library of Featherly's home. The doctor, who had been the family physician for the past twenty-five years, was a smooth faced, pleasant featured little man of sixty, and enjoyed the confidence of both father and son. His manner was blunt and outspoken; and he scowled unspeakable things at his patient.

"My dear doctor," said Featherly, "you are a prince of good fellows, but you consider it your duty to lecture me weekly about my mode of living. I would be seriously concerned about my health, were it not that I don't believe half that you say. Now isn't it a fact that you exaggerate the danger?"

"Not a bit of it," answered the doctor gruffly. "You must stop this thing. You don't realize—"

"Yes I do," laughed Featherly, "of course I do. Haven't I stopped it? I drink only the most

harmless kind of wine; I limit my smoking to eight cigars a day——”

Dr. Raddy threw up his hands in disgust. Featherly continued: “I lead a most exemplary life——”

“Yes, yes,” broke in Dr. Raddy, “a most exemplary life! And you are to entertain a few friends to-night. A few friends! Don’t I know what that means? Music! Dancing! Excitement! Don’t talk to me about a few friends. I was young myself once. Bah!” Featherly laughed and walked to the doctor’s side.

“Yes,” he said, “I have no doubt that you were as gay as any of them? You are not yet old, doctor.”

“There, there, I can’t make you understand that your heart——”

“That’s just it,” Featherly answered with a merry laugh, “the heart you have patched up, tinkered with and kept going for the past number of years, I have lost; and I have acquired possession of one as sound as a gold dollar fresh from the mint. It beats with the precision of an eight-day clock, and——”

“Dash your nonsense!” exclaimed the doctor excitedly, “must I tell you again——”

Featherly raised his hand with a deprecating gesture. “No!” he exclaimed, “in Heaven’s name don’t! Let me tell you something:—following your very excellent advice to avoid excitement, I have taken up the study of music.”

"Yes," came the scoffing reply, "the study of music-halls. I know the kind of music you study."

"Quite wrong," Featherly laughed, "I am studying the piano! I devote all my spare time to it. I expect my preceptress shortly."

"Fiddlesticks!" ejaculated the doctor.

"No, no," expostulated Featherly, "not fiddlesticks—piano, piano!"

"Em-m!" muttered the doctor. "I have no patience with you."

Further reprimand was interrupted by the entrance of Aunt Carry. She beamed on Dr. Raddy, whom she held in high esteem, and shook his hand warmly.

"My dear Dr. Raddy," she said, "how glad I am to see you! Have you lectured this boy?"

"Auntie dear," answered Featherly, "the doctor never lectures. He's too good-natured."

"I'm out of patience with him!" the doctor exclaimed.

Aunt Carry answered, "We must allow he's doing better. When he's at home—which is not often—he's strumming on the piano. It's tum, ti, tum,—tum, te, te, tum," she held up her hands and went through the motions illustrative of piano playing. Then with an air of assumed annoyance: "He nearly drives me mad!"

"Now will you believe me?" asked Featherly of the doctor in a tone of triumph.

The doctor turned sharply to the young man, then to Aunt Carry.

"He's away from home much of his time, you say?"

"Yes," Aunt Carry replied, "studying the piano, he says."

"Lady teacher?" The doctor's voice had a rising inflection. He looked sharply at Featherly, who laughed softly.

"A charming person whom we visit summers," Aunt Carry replied. "At present, she's living in New York, teaching music."

"Ha!" ejaculated the doctor in a tone that implied that further explanation was unnecessary.

Aunt Carry, misinterpreting his meaning, laid her hand on his shoulder. She looked anxious. "You don't think it injurious to his health?" she asked.

"Em!" growled the doctor, casting a look at Featherly, "I'll have to watch the symptoms."

"Miss Blair is coming shortly," Aunt Carry said.

"To give me my music lesson," added Featherly. He couldn't resist the temptation to raise the doctor's ire, and winked at him knowingly.

"Bah!" was his reward, uttered in a disdainful tone. "So you have quit the tra, la, la, for the tra, la, le." The doctor danced a few steps, which moved Aunt Carry to such a degree that she joined him, until he looked up with a con-

fused expression, as if discovered in an act entirely out of keeping with his professional dignity.

"Very good," laughed Featherly, "perhaps you'll consent to stay and spend the evening with us. Charming company, I assure you."

"Humph," came the answer. "Young man, I know you!"

Hester appeared at the door. "Pardon me," she said, "they did not tell me that you were engaged."

"The doctor just dropped in for a social chat," said Featherly. He stood behind Hester, and signalled to the doctor to say yes. The doctor took his hat from the table. Featherly continued: "You see, Miss Blair, the doctor is a great lover of horses, and we were just discussing Mr. Blake's new purchase."

"I was saying to Mr. Featherly,"—began the doctor. Featherly interrupted.

"The doctor was inviting me to look at Blake's horse. He says it is bound to make a record. You see, Miss Blair—" Featherly was shaking the doctor's hand violently and forcing him toward the door—"the doctor hasn't forgotten his horse-racing days. Have you doctor?"

The doctor did not answer, but bowed to the ladies and took his leave; from the hall, shaking his fist at Featherly, whose laugh followed him to the door.

"Hester, dear," said Aunt Carry, "I'm glad

you came early. It's another music lesson I suppose; and you young people won't allow spectators."

"Do remain, Aunt Carry," said Hester.

Featherly put his arm about his aunt and led her to the door.

"Aunt dear," he said, "I love you, and I dearly love to be with you—" he paused, then continued, "except during music lessons."

She smiled at Hester and went out.

"Ralph," anxiously inquired Hester when they were alone. "Why does the doctor call so often? You are not ill?"

"My dear," he replied, "how little you know of doctors. Of course I'm not ill; but Dr. Raddy sends in a yearly bill of enormous length, and he must do something to earn it: so he drops in and talks of horse racing and politics, and gives me a little advice. What do you think he recommended to-day?"

"I couldn't guess," she replied.

"A trip to Europe," he answered blandly.

"A trip to Europe?" she asked with interest.

"Exactly," replied Featherly, "just what we had planned for next summer. Isn't he a dear old fossil? But I forgive him, because he gives no physic; and his advice is of the most agreeable kind."

"Ah," exclaimed Hester, "I'm sure he's a good, kind soul."

"Good! Why, he's worth his weight in gold!

I mean his visits are. He comes in pleasantly; talks of social affairs; smokes one of my very good cigars; forgets to feel my pulse; advises a trip to Europe; looks very professional when about to go—all doctors must do that, of course—and departs smiling. At the end of the year the bill comes in—Jan. 23d—advice, \$25. O, it's a great profession, filled to overflowing with great frauds, and upon my honor Dr. Raddy is one of the biggest! But I forgive him, he's so good natured about it."

"And was that *all* he said to-day?"

"Quite! Wasn't it enough? You didn't expect him to advise a trip around the world?"

"But didn't he say you were not quite so well as——"

"O, dear no," came the calm reply, "he didn't have time to talk of my health. But about my music lesson! My dear, we are wasting time talking of frivolous matters. Do, sol, fa, mi," he sang; then seating himself at the piano, he drew forth most horrible and nerve-racking sounds.

Whether Featherly acted wisely or justly in keeping from Hester the knowledge of his true physical condition is difficult to determine. No doubt can be entertained of his purpose, which was to save her from what he deemed unnecessary worry. He had been told, many times, that he was afflicted with an organic disease of the heart that might terminate fatally. He had been

warned against excitement, and forbidden the use of stimulants or tobacco. As he expressed it, "he had been hedged in by conditions that were worse than the disease." He laughed at the advice given him, declared that the doctor didn't believe what he said, and went on his way enjoying life to the top of his bent. The elder Featherly was aware of his son's condition; but the young man laughed away his father's advice and fears, telling him that, "Dr. Raddy was an alarmist and only fit to administer to cats and old women," which latter assertion he did not in the least believe. He disliked all reference to his health; and his aunt, respecting his wishes, never referred to it except in the presence of Dr. Raddy.

The music lessons were more a source of pleasure than of profit, musically. Featherly's attempts at acquiring the art took the form of admiration of Hester's hands, caresses promiscuously bestowed on her neck, hair and cheeks; and a fixed purpose to converse upon any subject except music—but from choice, Norton. He naively remarked that music was a growth, and it was unhealthy to force it by extraordinary exertions; and he would add, "how much pleasanter it was to talk."

There was just sufficient peril in their daily intercourse to lend a zest and fascination to his life. He did not, like Hester, fear the result of

discovery, and were it not for her sake, he would almost have welcomed it.

They kept up a desultory attempt at music, varied by much laughter, until further progress was interrupted by Mrs. Pendleton's voice.

"My dear Aunt Carry! I'm delighted! Music lesson! Do you believe Ralph could ever learn to play a piano?" Aunt Carry's answer was unintelligible.

"Don't believe it!" Mrs. Pendleton rejoined. "He hasn't one particle of music in him. But (laughing) he has excellent taste and judgment in his selection of a teacher. I must go in and see the dears!" and Mrs. Pendleton bustled into the drawing-room all smiles and kisses and—well, it was good to see her once more.

"Hester dear, you don't know how happy it makes me to see your dear face again."

That, it must be confessed, was a woman's speech, and was quite what was expected of her. Nine out of ten women, knowing Hester, and entering the room, would have said the same thing—varying only the phraseology. Mrs. Pendleton differed from most women;—she meant what she said. With equal candor she addressed Featherly.

"Ralph, tell me, you aren't seriously—but no! impossible! ha, ha, ha."

Her silvery laugh vibrated through the room filling their hearts with joy, and died in little

waves of sound. It was honest mirth, and good to hear. She continued; "Music! Divine Art! When did you discover the spark burned within you?"

"If you doubt my ability," he answered with mock austerity, "pray allow me to demonstrate—"

"No!" she exclaimed, "In Heaven's name, don't!"

How near the truth Mrs. Pendleton guessed when she considered the relations existing between Hester and Featherly is only conjectural. It will never be known; for, again, unlike most women, she was not given to speaking her thoughts, or of telling that which she did not know; which went to prove that she was a most uncommon representative of her sex. She was quite satisfied to view their attachment from a seemingly disinterested distance, and, not losing a single tell-tale look, word, or the love signs which she knew so well, appeared to be wholly unconscious of what was taking place in the little love-world of Hester and Featherly. They were quite satisfied that they were deluding the universe; and self-conscious to a degree, of their profound caution and cleverness. "The dears," she'd whisper to herself, "aren't they lovely; and they believe they are the only two people on earth who know of their happiness. They remind me of two school children who have been up to some mischief, and sit down to the supper table under

the eyes of a mamma who was once young herself. It's perfectly delightful to watch them. She's suffering from fright, and a desire for concealment, of what, I cannot say; he doesn't seem to care if all the world knows he's rapturously in love with her,—and I shouldn't think he would. She's lovely! Ah, me! *I* was once young, and not so long ago." Turning her head archly to one side, she stealthily glanced into a mirror, which reflected the lines of her beautifully moulded neck, and sighed satisfactory approval.

"Tell me, Hester," Mrs. Pendleton asked, "does he make an attempt at playing?"

"Indeed yes," Hester replied, looking up at Featherly, whose eyes were fixed on her in unconscious admiration. The blood danced to her neck and cheeks, and she flashed a reproachful glance at him. Mrs. Pendleton took occasion to give way to silvery laughter that brought the guests into the room—inquiring interest stamped on their faces, as to the cause thereof.

CHAPTER IX

THE RECEPTION

The mad intoxication of the dance,
And sounds enchanting, to the revelry,
Lend sensuous aid.

THE drawing-room of the Featherly house was unique. The furnishings denoted extreme good taste,—from the Khursan and Karmen rugs, and the soft, velvety textures from Turkman that covered the floor, to the stuccoed ceiling, ablaze in bronze and gold. The walls were covered with tapestries of exquisite designs—specimens of a master's craft. On one side of the large room hung a Gobelin,—a Venetian scene; on the opposite wall was a Beauvais, representing a court dance during the reign of Louis XIV.;—both priceless specimens of the art of the seventeenth century. A few paintings adorned the walls, but these were representatives of the owner's knowledge of art and of his good judgment,—for they were masterpieces. It was distinctly a bachelor's apartment; yet there were little touches here and there that betrayed a woman's hand; and Aunt Carry's supervision

was unobtrusively manifest. The effect of it all was an air of luxurious comfort, soothing to the senses and pleasing to the eye.

The guests, eight or ten in number, entered unannounced, singly and in pairs. Featherly rose and smiled his welcome.

"My dear Featherly," said one of the gentlemen, "We believed we should be the first to arrive. You see, Miss Blair," he said, turning to greet Hester, "our host encourages us in dropping in on him unannounced. With him, where formality begins, friendship ends."

Featherly answered, "Friends who are welcome need no announcing; others may not enter. This is the border-land of Bohemia."

In the most informal manner they exchanged greetings. They were a representative New York gathering of the young, wealthy, and cultured class. Enjoyment was their chief occupation; and, beyond discussing the latest popular novel, new play or opera, their mental activity was neither far reaching, nor exercised to the danger point. They were mostly ciphers in the social and intellectual fabric;—their butterfly existence spiced with a little vicious gossip; the entry of a new face or the dropping out of an old one. Their world revolved within the radius of a few dozen families whose origin was enveloped in clouds of disputed facts; whose ancestors, with a woman's kindly desire to particularize, were referred to as dairy maids on the one side, and on

the other, trades people, not remarkable for their high moral standard in methods or means of acquiring wealth. But these little whispers, that were never meant to be overheard, did no particular harm; and added a relish to their lives that was highly palatable.

A group of three or four ladies were talking to Hester. The gentlemen were in earnest discussion near the door that led to the large dining hall. Miss Ainsley spoke:

"My dear Miss Blair, we have been listening to the romance of Mr. Dorkins and your old housekeeper. Let me see, Mollie is her name?"

"Millie," corrected Hester.

"Dear me, of course! And this Mr. Dorkins is a famous boatsman and fisherman, and quite a character."

"Why," interrupted Mrs. Pendleton, "didn't you know that he's living in New York? He's in Mr. Featherly's employ."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the first speaker in a tone of surprise that was refreshing in its unguarded naturalness and manifest interest.

"Quite possible," affirmed Mrs. Pendleton.

Miss Ainsley, in whom Slack had awakened a consuming interest, interrogated Hester with her eyes.

Hester answered quietly, "He has been with Mr. Featherly for the past month."

"Here! in this house?" exclaimed a guest.

“Ladies! The hero of the twenty years’ love romance!”

“Imagine a New Yorker,” exclaimed another, “being constant in his devotion for twenty years!”

“Impossible!” came from a chorus of voices.

The gentlemen looked up. “What is impossible?” Fenton asked. “Do not all speak at once.”

Miss Ainsley answered, “We were saying that—”

“Well,” interrupted Fenton, “we are all attention. Surely such unanimity of opinion among ladies, must be something that the gods could not dispute.”

“We were remarking—” answered Mrs. Pendleton, “after listening to Slack’s love romance, how impossible it would be for a New Yorker to be constant in his devotion for twenty years.”

“It would be impossible,” Fenton rejoined, then aside—“to the same woman. Surely you do not expect it?” he asked in a louder tone.

“Shocking! Of course we do!”

“There is one less constant than the New Yorker,” affirmed Fenton.

“And that one?” queried Miss Ainsley.

“The New Woman,” he answered with a laugh.

A servant entered with coffee and wine.

“Then I propose a toast to the New Woman!”

volunteered Miss Ainsley. Her declaration was met with exclamations of derision from the gentlemen.

"I will take water," declared Fenton.

"And why water, my dear Fenton?"

"Nothing can be too pure for the New Woman," he rejoined with a laugh.

"Featherly raised a glass of wine in the air and recited sotto voce:

"And I, to her, deep will I drink the toast;
And ask of evils, which to dread the most:
The one, that age doth give the fire of youth;
The other, always new, yet age forsooth
Adds not the charm to life that *this* can boast."

A chorus of applause rewarded Featherly's effort.

"My dear Mr. Featherly!" said Miss Ainsley, "surely you're not going to deny us the pleasure of meeting Mr. Dorkins; 'twould be as refreshing as a trip to Norton."

Featherly laughed. Slack's appearance, arrayed in his "best suit," was fresh in his memory. Still, he was not certain that it would be agreeable to the fisherman to meet his guests; nor did he wish to place Slack in an embarrassing position; although he was satisfied that his guests would treat the fisherman with the courtesy that good breeding demanded, he was not wholly reconciled to the proposition. He sought to interrogate Hester with his eyes, but she was conversing with Mrs. Pendleton, and apparently

seemed unconscious of the request which Miss Ainsley had made.

The suggestion being enforced by the other guests, Featherly replied :

“ I will invite him to join us if you desire it. I will speak to him.”

A shade of annoyance passed over Hester's face. She said nothing, but she felt that Slack would be uncomfortable and ill at ease ; and she feared that the amusement which his uncouth and awkward appearance would excite would be noticeable to the keen-eyed fisherman ; still she felt that she could not object, as the request had been made with seeming sincerity. Apart from his personal appearance, she was satisfied that the wily Slack would conduct himself not only with propriety, but, with a thrill of pride, she knew that his ready wit and nimble tongue would disconcert anyone who measured his intellect by his clumsy, rough exterior.

Since Slack had entered Featherly's employ, he had been treated more like a guest, or a confidential equal by his employer, than a servant. No one realized this more fully than the fisherman. There was a friendly, though unspoken, understanding between them ; and each showed the respect and consideration that their confidence in each other awakened. Featherly recognized Slack's sterling qualities of heart and mind ; he knew the fisherman loved Hester as a daughter ; and that she regarded him with affec-

tion. It was this mutual regard that induced Slack to come and live with him,—that he might be near her. Apart from this, he was fond of him. The quaint, blunt manners of the fisherman had appealed to his sense of humor; and a closer acquaintance awakened respect, that had grown into sincere regard.

The conversation and laughter ceased as Featherly and Slack entered the room. Featherly introduced Slack to each of the company with the same formality he would have employed with any social equal.

“Mr. Fenton needs no introduction,” Featherly said as he concluded, “you have met before.”

“Yaas,” answered Slack turning to Fenton, “’pears ter me we hev, hevn’t we?”

Fenton nodded his head, and a faint smile played about his mouth as he recalled their meeting on the wharf.

Slack was dressed in the same suit of clothes that he had brought from Norton. The coat was many sizes too large, the trousers distinctly baggy, and, contrary to country custom, much too long. The legs of the trousers were narrow at the bottom and rested on his generous sized boots,—a progression of wrinkles and loose cloth from his waist down. His dark colored coat and trousers were relieved by a cravat and waistcoat of daring colors. His hair betrayed fruit-

less efforts at combing,—but it showed there had been an effort.

The music from a string band in the adjoining room came through the door.

“Ladies, can you resist that waltz?” asked Fenton.

“It is divine,” answered Miss Ainsley.

Fenton offered her his arm, and followed by the others, they were soon whirling past the open door to the music of a Strauss waltz.

Slack seated himself beside Hester. They were alone.

“Slacky, dear,” she said, “tell me truly, how do you like it?”

He looked into her eyes. She was very dear to him and he spoke softly:

“Hessie, I’d give more fur one day at home with you an’ Ethy an’ Millie, ’n er whole lifetime er this.”

She patted one of his huge hands with her own. “I know you would, Slacky dear,” she answered, “it won’t be long before summer, and, O Slack!” she continued in a doleful tone, “won’t Millie fret her life away before then?”

“Ha, ha, ha,” laughed Slack; then with mock seriousness: “derned ef I ain’t glad of it! She’s made me fret fer twenty years!” Further conversation was interrupted by Miss Ainsley.

“You don’t dance, Mr. Dorkins?”

Hester smiled. Slack replied:

"O yes, not them ther fancy dances; but ef yer hev a regular square dance, er Chorus Jig, I don't min' ef I try it."

"The Chorus Jig!" exclaimed Miss Ainsley, "what a pretty name for a dance."

"O yes," answered Slack, "and it's a pretty dance I ken tell yer."

"Will you describe how they dance it, Mr. Dorkins?"

The question was asked in good faith and Slack answered with equal sincerity.

"Why certainly, I don't min' showin' yer. It goes like this."

Slack stood up and began the old country dance, calling off the changes in a loud tone. Commencing with "head couple down the center,"—with a light foot, his head in the air, humming the tune of the dance meanwhile, he led an imaginary partner down the center, tripping off the steps of the dance over the carpet half way across the room and back again. The second change he called; and through the set he crossed and recrossed, balanced and swung to the next, his feet barely touching the floor. He turned and pivoted with reckless abandon; and ended with a flourish of feet, arms and hands, that would wring the heart of a country prize dancer with envy.

The music had ceased before Slack began dancing. The guests were grouped at the door,

convulsed with laughter, but watching the movements of the agile Slack.

They crowded around him, they applauded him, they thanked him.

"But you must teach us the dance!" exclaimed one of the ladies.

"Nothin'd give me greater pleasure," answered Slack with a courtesy.

The music began again. Hester and Featherly joined the dance; Fenton and one of the gentlemen who was not dancing lingered behind in earnest conversation.

"Gad!" exclaimed Fenton, looking round the deserted room to assure himself that they were alone, "she's a beautiful woman. This business of teaching music is all a blind; but upon my honor, she carries it off with a high hand! She's as chilly as an iceberg, and as unapproachable as the favorite in the Sultan's harem."

"Do you doubt—" said his companion.

"My dear fellow, I doubt nothing. I have learned the lesson that in this life, if you wish to be comfortable, never doubt;—take everything for granted. Enough for me that she's adorable, and that I'm hopelessly in love with her; but she treats me with maddening indifference."

"But," rejoined the other, "would it be wise to give Featherly offence? He'll make a devil of a row."

"Featherly'll not trouble anyone much longer.

He has a heart trouble that may terminate fatally at any moment. I know it from his family physician. This excitement, for him, is tempting fate."

"Is Miss Blair aware of this?"

"No, he hides it from her. I will soon have the field to myself; but I am impatient."

Mrs. Pendleton entered the room and approached Fenton. She tapped him lightly on the arm with her fan.

"Come," she said, looking sharply at him, "tell me what kind of a conspiracy you are concocting now?"

"We were just discussing the political situation," Fenton answered. "You see, we are in the race for honors."

"Bah!" she exclaimed, "I never knew you to devote much time to politics when in the presence of ladies. Have you selected the winner?"

"I think so," he answered with a laugh.

"As I once heard you say of a certain race:— 'you have the pole and will be in at the finish!'"

Fenton's companion, not understanding the drift of their remarks, joined the dancers. Slack had entered the room and seated himself near the piano, which was between him and Fenton.

"Exactly, my dear Laura," Fenton replied to her last remark, "you honor me even in the exercise of your memory."

"Perhaps not in the exercise of my judgment," she replied, "for in this race you'll lose."

He laughed scoffingly. "You are a worthy champion," he said, "but wait—the finish is not yet."

"Then it is still war?"

"You force the fighting," he replied, "remember I'm no novice."

"True, you've seen service;—you're entitled to be termed a Regular."

"You do me a great honor; but I do not depreciate my foe. You are——"

"A volunteer!" she interrupted. "In our country the standard is high. I'll endeavor not to lower it."

"All is fair in war and—love!"

"In this case, we will recognize only the former."

"And you will not consider a truce?"

"Never! until you are completely routed!"

"So be it. Will you permit me?" He offered her his arm and they joined the dancers.

The perplexed gaze of the fisherman followed them to the door. He remained silent for a full minute deep in thought. Unconsciously he struck his forehead with the knuckles of his hand, then spoke musingly:

"This be the second time I've heered them two a talkin' er war an' races. What's it all about? That's what sticks me! The dern skunk Fenton's up ter some game, an' th' widder's a tryin' to balk 'im; an' ther's a race er some kind atween 'em. Thet's as plain as th' wart on Captain Ed-

wards's nose. But what is it? Las' summer th' were warin' uv it, an' now they're at it agin."

His eyes followed the dancers for a moment. His face betrayed that he could arrive at no satisfactory conclusion. "Well, Slacky," he continued, "yer'll hev ter allow thet up ter th' present time, as fer as Fenton an' th' widder's consarned, yer stumped. Yep, thet's what yer be; but when it comes ter bein' in at th' finish, ef it's anything consarnin' Hessie——"

He paused. He had struck the keynote of his conjectures. He did not care to admit it even to himself, but from the first, he believed that Hester was in some way identified with Mrs. Pendleton's interest in the subject under discussion. When Slack spoke Hester's name an ugly light shone in his eyes, and he involuntarily clinched his hands. Then his thoughts turned to Mrs. Pendleton and he smiled. He held her in high regard. His eyes twinkled, and an amused expression played around the corners of his mouth.

"By Gum! Yer up agin it my *dear* Mr. Fenton, ef yer buck up again th' widder. She's an ole war-horse, an' a good one yet; an' ef it's a question of a race atween yer, why, dern me! I'll bet my las' dollar, yes, and my schooner ter boot, on th' widder!" and he followed the subject of his last remark with a tender glance as she glided by the door.

The music ceased. Miss Ainsley approached Slack.

"We have arranged for a cotillion next, Mr. Dorkins. Will you dance?"

"Yes," he replied, "ef yer will honor me?"

"With pleasure," she answered.

She laid the tips of her fingers on Slack's arm and they led the way to the ball-room.

The music commenced, and, with a courtly bow, the fisherman began the dance. The guests had waited for this moment expectantly. They were prepared to be amused; and under their well-bred assumption of indifference, they studiously refrained from bestowing upon the fisherman more notice than courtesy demanded. They would not bestow upon him more than ordinary notice, so they laboriously and clumsily set about the task of not watching him; while the eyes of every dancer took in the movements of the seemingly unconscious Slack. But they overdid it: and besides, they measured their wits with one far more crafty and discerning than themselves. He apparently gave his undivided attention to his partner and the intricacies of the figures that he was dancing; but there was a faint—a very faint suspicion of a smile hovering around the corners of his mouth, and anyone in Norton could have told that, "Slacky was havin' some fun with 'em." But they didn't know it, nor was it his intention that they should.

He danced the figures with a sturdy grace and a light foot; and they forgot their role of patro-

nizing unconcern and watched him with ill-concealed delight.

In studying this man of many parts, a doubt often obtruded itself as to his genuineness; and one who watched him closely, was almost forced to believe that his rough exterior, and homely ways, were, in a degree, assumed. He was a man of surprises: and those who had known him the longest, were forced to admit that he was beyond fathoming. He was content to have himself judged by appearance. Beyond that—but we'll know him better as we proceed.

They finished the dance and entered the drawing room. Hester was seated on a divan talking to Mrs. Pendleton. A servant entered with a salver on which was a card. "For Miss Blair," he said.

Hester took the card and glanced at it. Her face became livid, but she manifested no other sign of emotion. Featherly approached.

"Will you dance this set, Hester?" he asked.

"No, thanks," she calmly replied. "Mrs. Pendleton, will you kindly take my place?"

"With pleasure, dear," Mrs. Pendleton replied, "Featherly and I are old partners. Dear me! It's so many years since we began dancing together, that I shudder to think of it. Do you know, Hester, that at one time I really believed Ralph took an interest in me? But"—with a sad smile—"that was before I met poor, dear

Pendleton." And she rattled on until Featherly led her away.

Hester smiled wearily and turned to the servant.

"Is the gentleman waiting?"

"Yes, miss, in the south hall."

"Show him in by the side entrance."

The servant withdrew. Hester, who was clutching the card in her trembling fingers, read the name—John Cary.

CHAPTER X

“MY PROMISE! JUST HEAVEN, POINT ME THE WAY!”

A woman's word. How frail a thing! Yet He
Who doth record each act and deed and thought,
Has with His hand on golden tablet wrought
These words, to live through all eternity:
If thou, thy promise give, thy promise keep;
For as in life ye sow, so shall ye reap.
I here record a vow—a woman's word.
'Tis sacred in the annals of the Lord.

HESTER stood beside a small table that supported a bronze figure, resting her left hand lightly upon it. Her features were pale, and a look of apprehension shone in her eyes, for she felt that Cary's visit boded no good. That some powerful motive prompted his untimely visit, she had no doubt. Did it concern herself, or worse—had some misfortune befallen her sister? No, she argued, it must be something of a personal nature. Doubt gave place to fear. What if John suspected the truth? What if her marriage were already known at Norton. Her thoughts then reverted to the man she was waiting to see. She had perfect confidence in his loyalty and discretion. Time had proved his worth; and she felt that whatever the impulse

that had prompted his unseemly visit, it was founded on a pure and disinterested regard for her welfare.

John entered the side door and stood irresolute, waiting for her to speak. There was something in his bearing that was foreign to him:—a hesitancy in his manner; a faltering of purpose, that set ill upon him. His naturally frank, fearless eyes, after a glance of recognition, sought the floor. His whole demeanor proclaimed that he was there on an unwilling and unpleasant mission; and the expression of mouth and chin affirmed his determination to fulfill it.

Hester knew him well. She read every changing expression that swept over his face. Fear almost suffocated her, and her heart beat with dread expectancy.

“John,” she said falteringly, “what has happened? Is Ethel——”

“No,” he answered, divining her thoughts, “she is well.”

“Thank God!” Hester exclaimed. She extended her hand to him. “Forgive my selfish fears, but your visit at this late hour startled me. I feel that some powerful motive must have prompted you to seek me here. Don’t keep me in suspense. What is it? Are you——”

“It is not of myself I came to speak; it is of you, Hester.”

“Of me?”

“Yes, of you,” he answered. There was a sor-

rowing inflection in his voice that redoubled her fears.

"Hester, you have faith in me?" he asked.

"Need you ask?"

"No," he said, "I believe you have. It is not easy to say what I came here to tell you, but——"

"Well?" she asked, with a determined effort to be calm.

"I have just come from Norton. My stay here is limited only to a few hours. I return to-night, and must leave on the midnight train. I could not go until I had seen you—until I had spoken to you."

Hester remained silent. The blood surged to her neck and cheek, and receding, left her face even paler than before.

"Since you came to New York," he continued with an effort, "there has been gossip in the village. It was not long before your name and that of Mr. Featherly were coupled unpleasantly."

"Unpleasantly!" she repeated, "but how?"

"I cannot bring myself to think of it," he said with rising anger, "much less to speak of it, but they say——"

"They say——" she echoed.

"They question your manner of living——"

"My manner of living——"

"But it is even worse than that——"

"Worse?"

"Yes," he replied, "but I cannot——"

"But you must," she interrupted, "it is my

right. You have told me too much or too little. Speak, John.”

The pride of her race came to her relief and dominated her. She stood with flashing eyes, her form erect, and her head thrown back. With the consciousness of her own purity, she could at that moment have faced the whole world. She did not stop to consider that, by her own act, she had placed herself in a false position:—a position which had invited the very charge she was now forced to meet.

“Remember, Hester,” said Cary, “never in my life have I doubted you for an instant.”

“Doubted me! doubted me! Why should you doubt me?” she demanded, “by what right should you doubt me?” There was a ring of passion in her voice.

“Can you ask that of me, Hester?” he said, a shade of reproach in his tone, “has not a life-long love——”

“Stop!” there was passion in her voice, “you have no right to speak to me of love.”

“I have the right of a friendship which began when we were children, the right of a devotion that has never wavered; a right given me by your father, when, on his death bed, with his hand in mine, he entrusted you and Ethel to my care. I have the right of a man’s love that he knows but once:—a love that he has offered you, and shall continue to offer you, that he offers you now——”

"How do you dare!" she said angrily.

"Dare, Hester, dare? That word, and from you?"

"O, no, no, my God! John, I forgot myself for the moment. I can make it all clear to you with just a word. No, no," she continued in a confused manner, "I quite forgot—I——"

"You can make what clear?" he asked.

"It is nothing!" she said with an effort to regain her composure, "I am unnerved. The unexpectedness of your coming; the fear that Ethel was ill; the horrible news from the village—all this overcame me! You will forgive me, John? Ah! but need I ask? Do I not know your good heart, as I do the dear old home? But you have not told me all. You are keeping something back! You have the right of our friendship, the right of my trust in you to speak plainly. What is it, John?"

"I cannot!" he faltered.

"You must." There was a fierce intensity in her tone which rang through the room.

"It is——"

"Yes——"

"It is—that you do not—Hester, in Heaven's name do not force me to say it! I——"

"If you have the love for me that you profess, prove it! Speak!"

A struggle was going on within him. He knew that the words he was about to utter would strike her to the heart. He felt that it was easier to

imprint a blow upon her face, than to say that which would fill her with shame and mortification. He knew her high sense of honor; her love for her family name; the zealous care with which she guarded her own and her sister's reputation; and his courage failed as he looked at her beautiful face.

Her eyes sought his in a startled gaze of inquiry.

“It is,” he said after a pause, “that you do not make your living honestly—that—that—you are the mistress of Mr. Featherly.”

Hester uttered a piercing scream and covered her face with her hands. Her body swayed as a torrent of emotion swept over her, and tearless sobs shook her frame. She appeared about to fall, and John stepped quickly to her side. His movement seemed to arrest the paroxysm of feeling and she uncovered her face, on which was stamped the suffering she was undergoing. She made a determined effort to control herself and spoke:

“The shame! The humiliation! You do not believe it, John?”

“Can you ask me, Hester?” he asked sadly. “You know my faith in you.”

“Yes,” she answered, “thank God I do.” A determined light shone in her eyes. “John,” she said abruptly, “stay here until I call Mr. Featherly.”

They were standing before an alcove made by

a large bow window, that protruded some feet from the wall of the building and looked out on an open area. Hester drew one of the silken draperies and motioned John to a seat.

"You will be unobserved here," she said. "I will return in a few moments."

John sat in the seat designated. The sound of the music and laughter from the adjoining room jarred upon him. He smiled bitterly. He mentally contrasted the difference in the surroundings and the atmosphere of luxury which pervaded the room, with the refined quiet and homely comfort of their Norton home. His attention was arrested by some one entering. He recognized Fenton's voice.

"I am getting nervous!" Fenton was saying in a tone of irritation. "I have played a strong card, and I don't want any slip to spoil the game. To-day I sent a letter to Featherly's father, disclosing the son's relations with Hester. He is coming here to-night. Mark me! I know the father;—he is the soul of honor. To-night will end this affair. The old man will make a scene; Hester will have to go; and I shall have a clear field."

Mrs. Pendleton had entered quietly, and, after casting a hurried glance at Fenton and his companion, and assuring herself that she was unobserved, stepped behind a Japanese screen that stood at the right of the door leading to the impromptu ball-room.

“ That’s risky,” answered Fenton’s companion, “ think you’re safe in the matter? ”

“ Yes, I bound the old man to secrecy.”

“ And what do you propose to do? ”

“ Do? ” laughed Fenton. “ The rest is easy. Pursue her to the end, until I bring her to my way of thinking. O, it’s a game I’m up in. Hark! Is there anyone here? ”

John had sprung to his feet. He dashed the curtains aside, and strode into the center of the room. His eyes blazed, and he made a most magnificent though formidable picture. With clenched fists he approached Fenton.

“ Cur! ” he cried, “ you will settle with me first.”

“ The country lover! ” Fenton sneeringly answered.

John sprang toward him, but before he could strike, Mrs. Pendleton stood between them.

“ Stop! We will have no scandal here! My dear Fenton, you now have two adversaries to deal with. But we must conduct our warfare elsewhere. Mr. Cary,” she said, turning to John, “ I beg of you for Hester’s sake to desist. Hush! not a word! They are coming.

John withdrew to his former seat. Featherly entered the room alone. The others remained behind chatting and laughing.

As Featherly came through the door he reeled slightly and, when well within the room, stag-

gered and seemed about to fall, but steadied himself by grasping the piano.

"Laura," he said to Mrs. Pendleton, "where is Hester?" He spoke with an effort: his right hand pressed over his heart.

"She is——" began Mrs. Pendleton.

"No matter!" he cried. His voice told the suffering he was undergoing. "Laura, I can trust you! Go to her! Feign illness, anything; but keep her out of the room until I recover."

"Can I be of any assistance to you, old man?" Fenton asked.

"No," Featherly answered with an effort. "A touch of the old trouble, that's all. It'll soon pass." The muscles of his face twitched with pain. "Ah!" he muttered, "it's a nuisance!"

A servant entered and announced "Mr. Featherly."

The announcement was followed by the entrance of an elderly man of about sixty-five years. He saw his son and walked quickly to him.

"Are you ill, Ralph?" he asked.

"Tut, tut, father; a touch of the old trouble. It will soon pass."

"Shall I send for Dr. Raddy?" the elder man inquired in a tone of concern.

Featherly made a determined effort to control himself. With a poor attempt at a smile, and a jaunty air, he asked,

"Do you love me father?"

"Yes, my son, but——"

“Then send not for Dr. Raddy. ’Tis but a flutter of the heart, and a little flutter at that. I must confess, governor, that wine’s the father of the complaint. ’Twill pass in a moment.” He shuddered convulsively, then, with an attempt at grandiloquence, continued: “The doctor, good soul, would add physic, and, between the two, eh, faith! You’d have no son. ’Tis passing, —now coming, now going, ebbing and flowing, like the favors of love, whose home it is, alas! oft untidily kept!”

His body swayed from side to side, his hand clutched at his heart, and his face was distorted with pain.

“And you will not have the doctor, Ralph?”

“I have always obeyed you, father?”

“Yes, my son.”

“And for one breach I would be forgiven, methinks?”

“Indeed yes, Ralph, but I fear——” the old man’s tone was husky. His son replied,

“Fear not. Fear is the harbinger of misfortune, courage its master.” He continued in an almost inaudible tone, “but it’s a stubborn visitor, and an uncivil one. It will not yield with good grace. Ah!” he staggered and nearly fell. His father placed his arm around him and they leaned against the piano.

Featherly’s eyes took on a glassy look. His face was an ashen gray color; his strength seemed to have forsaken him; and his hands fell

lifeless to his side. With an effort, and with a pause between each word, he spoke:

“Hester,” he said faintly, “father—I—have a—confession—to—make—before — too — late. Hester—is—my——” a gurgling cry was all he was able to utter. He fell into his father’s arms—dead.

A moment they stood thus. The stillness that settled over the room was oppressive;—the labored breathing of the old man being the only audible sound. Fenton was the first to recover his presence of mind. He stepped forward lightly, and, lifting the dead body, laid it on the divan. He placed his hand over the young man’s heart, and turning to the guests, just as Hester and Mrs. Pendleton appeared in the doorway, said, “He is dead.”

The old man leaned against the piano with bowed head. He seemed oblivious of his surroundings, until a piercing shriek aroused him. He turned and confronted Hester.

A look of horror overspread her features. She stood on the threshold of the door as if turned to stone. In a blank stare her eyes rested on the face of her dead husband.

When Mr. Featherly heard Hester cry out, he had taken a step backward, and stood by the body of his son. He looked at her, but she did not see him. She had heard Fenton’s declaration that her husband was dead; saw his white, distorted, upturned face, and the truth forced itself

upon her. A life agony was condensed in that one moment. The cry she uttered rang through the house, and chilled the blood of her listeners.

As if in mockery of her grief, the band struck up a lively waltz, until it was stilled by one of the guests.

“Dead!” Hester whispered the word as she stepped into the room. Her lips did not move and the word came in a hollow sound. “Dead!” she continued, “no, no, no!”

Her eyes still fixed on the white face, she walked, or glided into the middle of the room, as if to fall on the body of her husband.

The old man stepped in front of her, and Hester raised her eyes slowly to his face.

“Stop!” he said, raising his hand and pointing to the door, “in the presence of my dead son——”

The words conveyed but little meaning to her.

“Dead!” she whispered in an unnatural voice. “Did you say he was dead? And you would prevent me——me——”

“Go, leave me alone with my grief.” He raised his hand and again pointed to the door, “you have no further right here. Go!”

A wild, mirthless laugh, tinged with bitterness and mocking derision, was her answer. It was unnatural mirth; it meant nothing, nor did it sound human; and she was unconscious of any effort that produced it.

The words at last seemed to force themselves on her understanding.

"I," she said, touching her breast with the index finger of her right hand, "no further—right—here? By the dead body of my——"

Her face assumed the same look that it wore when she had heard Fenton proclaim her husband dead. She spoke again. "I—no—further—right—here? My God!"—there was a fierce intensity. "I will see him!" She was about to advance when Mr. Featherly held out his hand to restrain her.

"Go," he said sadly, "I beseech you."

"No!" her passionless tone rang from room to room. "I have a right here. No, I say again—no! I remain!" She raised her hand slowly and pointed above. Her words came with painful distinctness as she continued: "I—am—his—"

She paused as if struck speechless. She stood thus with her hand in the air for a full minute; then in a voice that had lost every vestige of naturalness—that was half a whisper, half a wail of agony, she faltered: "My promise. Just Heaven, point me the way!"

Her eyes still riveted on her husband's body, she turned slowly and dragged herself toward the door. She seemed unconscious of what she was doing. The only purpose that fixed itself in her mind, was that the white, upturned face should be the last object that her eyes would rest upon. She realized that she must go; that

she was driven out, as though she were something unclean; and by the father of the man she loved. In life he had been hers; in death he was lost to her—doubly so. Hers was a grief that dammed up the fountain head of tears, and none came to relieve the strain. She was alone in every sense and meaning of the word.

Yet no. Every syllable she had uttered, every look, every gesture of pain, of agony, of humiliation, has struck, like a knife thrust, into the heart of John Cary. He stood apart, receiving each successive blow, his heart wrung with the knowledge that he could not, by word or act, save or assist her. He realized Hester's great love for the man who lay dead before them; but no shadow of resentment crossed his mind. His heart was filled with but one emotion—pity for the woman he loved. A feeling of utter helplessness took possession of him as he saw the greatness of her devotion, and the depth of her sorrow. Yet he could do nothing but suffer with her.

As Hester neared the door, John awoke to the heartlessness of the father, and a feeling of anger sent the blood flying to his face.

He walked quickly toward her, then turned and looked with blazing eyes at Mr. Featherly, who was bending over the body of his son. John did not speak but turned again toward Hester. Her hands were thrown into the air, and she fell over the threshold in a swoon.

CHAPTER XI

THE DAY FOLLOWING FEATHERLY'S DEATH

The wind is sighing, for hope is dying;

The Heavens are threatening, dark and drear.

'Mid swirl and scurry, the snowflakes hurry,

With ghostly chatter and noisome jeer.

And night, descending, its mantle is lending

Of shuddering heartache and fear.

THE morning following the death of Ralph Featherly, Hester was alone in her apartments. The servant had gone out on some matter connected with her duties; and the quiet within was broken only by the ticking of the clock on the mantel. The day was dark and gloomy; a light snow had fallen during the night, and the cold intensified as the day grew old. A blustering wind sent the light crystals, that were half snow and half sleet, scurrying along the pavements, and into the faces of the few who were on the street. The wind whistled ominously, and the threatening clouds chased each other across a leaden sky. Intermittently, black clouds rolled before the sun, the wind increased, and the fine snow picked up from one side of the street by the erratic wind, would be deposited with a prolonged, whistling sigh under the cold protection of the opposite curbstone. It was a day for tears, for heartaches, for evil

forebodings; when the sunshine leaves the world to its own melancholy bent.

Hester stood before the window and looked out upon the street. Her forehead was pressed against the glass, and she stared fixedly before her. She saw nothing. She was unconscious of the cold without; and she felt only the terrible weight of despair that lay upon her heart, crushing out hope, and leaving only a feeling of utter loneliness. Her mind traversed in detail her life of the past few months. She lived again the long summer days at Norton; she went through her marriage ceremony; she felt the mysterious gloom of the darkened church; her husband's departure for New York, and the days of anxious waiting that followed. She reviewed the past few months of her happy married life, marred only by the fear of discovery. Then, with a shudder, she lived again through the last night. The music of the dance rang in her ears; she heard Fenton's voice as he pronounced her husband dead; she saw his white upturned face as he lay on the divan. The pitiless tones of the elder Featherly haunted her memory as he bade her go—go—without so much as a last look at her dead husband,—out into the world, with the stamp of dishonor on her name. A soft moan escaped her, and she shuddered convulsively. She did not see her servant, who had entered noiselessly; and her name was spoken twice before she heeded it.

"Did Miss Blair wish anything?"

"No," came the reply in an almost inaudible voice.

"Would she not like a cup of tea?"

"No, thanks, nothing," came the response in the same hopeless tone.

The maid withdrew, and Hester's eyes again rested on the frowning walls opposite her window.

The hours went by, and the shades of evening settled over the city. Once or twice she turned,—her hands clasped tightly together until the finger nails were pressed deep into the flesh,—and walked the length of the room, only to return to her former position before the window.

A newsboy passed the house crying the latest news; closed carriages drove by at a rapid pace; and the lights flickered from the windows opposite, intensifying the gloom of the night:—she saw or heard nothing. Her maid again entered with a cup of tea. Hester drank it at the maid's request; then resumed her place at the window. The cold glass had a soothing effect upon her, for it eased the throbbing of her temples; and the happenings of the past night arranged themselves more clearly in her mind.

At last she was conscious of the silver tones of the clock on the mantel as it struck the hour,—ten, eleven, twelve. She pressed her hand to her head. "Midnight." She spoke softly; her voice

had a hollow ring. She walked to the center of the room and stood motionless.

"He is there, alone, not a block away," she murmured. A sudden resolve seemed to take possession of her.

"Why couldn't I?" she whispered, "only one or two watchers will be with the body." She paused. Her eyes glowed with the fierceness of a sudden resolve.

"His latch-key!" She almost shrieked the words.

With nervous, impetuous step, she stood beside the mantel. Knowing exactly where to find what she sought, she grasped the key in her hand, clutching it as though she expected to fight for its possession. It was the latch-key to the side entrance of her husband's home. Featherly had been in the habit of leaving it on the mantel. He wished to enter his house without inviting the comment of the servants; and had taken the precaution to always leave this extra key in Hester's apartments.

"Why shouldn't I see him?" she exclaimed in a suppressed whisper. "He is mine—mine. I may not be discovered. If I am! Well, they may force me to disclose—no, no," she moaned, "not that, not that!"

She threw a dark cloak over her shoulders and stood irresolute in the middle of the room. She was determined to see the body of her husband;

yet she hesitated. Fear seemed to take possession of her. She trembled; then, as the clock chimed the quarter hour, she turned to the door. Like a shadow she crept through the hall and out to the street. The keen wind revived her; and with a firm step she hurried on. A policeman paused and looked sharply at her. She turned her head that he might not see her face, and, wrapping her cloak more closely about her, kept on her way.

When she neared the door of her husband's home, fear again almost overcame her. What if she were recognized before she could gain an entrance? What if there were others than servants in the room where her husband's body lay? She trembled as she mounted the stoop; and her heart beat with the dread that took possession of her, until she felt that she should suffocate.

With trembling fingers she inserted the key in the lock. The sound filled her with terror. The key turned easily, the heavy door swung open, and she passed into the inner hall in a turmoil of fear. A dim light was burning. Silently she crept to the drawing-room, but heavy draperies covered the entrance. As she cautiously peered into the room she could see the outline of the shroud that enveloped the body of her husband; beside the bier sat the butler. Her heart beat tumultuously, and fear gave place to joyous satisfaction. No one else was to be seen, yet she could hear suppressed tones coming from



“The Butler recognized her at a glance.”



the adjoining dining-room. She knew the butler well, and her courage returned. If he did not cry out and give the alarm when she entered, she was safe.

With nervous dread she parted the curtains and stepped into the room. So deft were her movements, so silently did she effect her entrance, that it was some moments after she had entered the drawing-room before the butler was aware of her presence. She watched him closely, and, as he turned his face toward her, she lifted her hand and placed a warning finger on her lips to command silence.

The butler, recognizing her at a glance and observing the cautionary signal, remained silent.

Hester glided across the room, and, leaning over the body of her husband, cast a hurried glance in the direction whence the sound of voices came.

She kissed his eyes, his forehead, again and again. She felt the cold touch of his lifeless lips on her own, and tears, the first that had come to relieve the awful strain, crept down her cheeks. Long and intently she gazed on the face that, even in death, wore its habitual expression of good nature. She was aroused by a gentle touch on her arm, and, turning, saw the butler pointing in the direction of the door. She whispered: "James, I can trust you?" A nod was the reply; then hurriedly kissing her husband's lips, she glided from the room.

The excitement of the last few moments had given her strength; but as the door closed behind her, and she descended the stoop to the sidewalk, she felt that she should sink to the ground. The wind had increased, and drove the sleet and snow into her face. A sudden gust would arrest her progress for a moment; then she would again blindly stagger on. She reached the door of her home. She held the pass-key in her hand. Weakness overcame her for an instant, and she leaned against the outer door. A full sense of weariness and of loneliness came over her, and she dreaded to enter the house and again face the solitary stillness within.

She was not alone;—neither was she friendless. Had Hester been observant she might have seen a closely muffled figure dogging her footsteps. From the moment she had left her own home, until she had entered Featherly's, Slack had followed at a safe distance, that he might not be noticed. After she had entered Featherly's, he had waited in the shadow of the opposite house until Hester had reappeared. He had quietly followed her, and, observing her weakness as she leaned against the door, he had cautiously advanced to render her assistance should she need it. Many times during the day he had passed and repassed the house, seeing always her grief-stricken face at the window; never going farther than the corner of the street. It wrung his heart to look at her, yet he felt, and wisely, that the

best service he could render, was to leave her alone with her sorrow.

After fruitless efforts Hester opened the door and entered the house. She loosened her cloak and it fell from her shoulders to the floor. Her strength forsook her, and, with a moan, she sank upon a couch where she lay till morning.

Before the house Slack kept up his vigil throughout the night.

CHAPTER XII

SLACK'S RETURN TO NORTON

A Lie with Truth set out one day,
To journey along the same highway:
As on they went, each passer-by
A helping hand lent to the Lie.
Quoth Truth: "Eh faith! how can it be
They tender not their help to me?"
With scornful mien came quick reply—
"Because, my friend, they love a Lie."

A WEEK after the death of Featherly, the north bound train stopped at the station of Norton. Slack alighted and looked sharply about him. It was early evening, and while at that season of the year, he hardly expected it, he hoped that the public carriage would be in waiting. He would have preferred to walk to the Blair farm, but he wished to give Jed Dudley, the driver of the only public conveyance to the village, certain information. This, the wily Slack knew full well, would be distributed through the village within the hour. Slack, during his journey from New York, had mapped out the course he would pursue; and, as he stepped from the platform, it was with satisfaction that he saw the loquacious Jed waiting for pas-

sengers. Slack did not appear to see him, however, and started in the direction of the village.

"Hello, there, Slacky," bellowed Jed after the retreating fisherman, "Be thet you? Want a ride? Won't cost yer a dern cent."

"Why, how do!" answered Slack in a surprised tone, "didn't spect ter see yer here. Yes," he drawled, "don't mind if I do ride."

Slack shook the expectant Jed warmly by the hand and took a seat beside him. There were no other passengers, and Jed gloatingly settled himself to hear the news. This was exactly what Slack most desired. He knew that before he had finished his supper—and Slack was very hungry—that whatever information he vouchsafed to Jed, would be recounted with many little embellishments and exaggerations to everyone in the village who would listen; and this the dear soul would do, if gossip was to be heard. The more he imposed secrecy on the talkative driver, the more certain was Slack that the very impression which he wished to spread regarding Hester, would be sent broadcast by the gossipy Jed. It was one of the latter's peculiarities that he never wasted time in culling news; and, as it was but a short distance to the Blair homestead, he came to the point at once.

"How be things in New York?" he asked.

"Famous!" answered Slack with enthusiasm. "O'course, Mr. Featherly a dyin' knocked me out er a job."

"Be he dead?" inquired Jed.

"Yes, died a week ago," Slack answered.

"Gum, thet be sudden! How be Hessie gettin' 'long?"

"Couldn't be a doin' better," Slack answered, "moren' she ken attend ter."

"Is thet so?"

"Thet's what it be. Playin' all th' time, concerts, 'n scholars n'——"

"Gosh! I wouldn't er believed it!" broke in Jed.

"Well yer kin," drawled Slack, "I tell her she be a killin' of herself workin'! Now they've offered her a chance to play in one er them swell churches."

"I swan!" exclaimed Jed.

There was a slight shade of disappointment in the driver's tone that did not escape the observant Slack. This report of Hester's prosperity was contrary to the accepted verdict of the villagers. Resentment filled Slack's heart; and it would have given him keen pleasure to have kicked his companion from the seat to the ground. With an added, soft inflection in his voice, that invited closer confidence, Slack resumed:

"Since the fust day she got ter New York, they bin a chasin' of her ter play. She's got a fine place ter live in I kin tell yer; an' one o' them three-cornered pianey's. It's bigger 'n this yer

hitch er yourn, hosses an' all; only the legs be sounder 'n them ther' critters yer be a drivin'."

Slack could not resist this little fling at Jed's spavined pair. In a conciliatory tone he continued: "I don't believe Hessie'll keer ter come back here. I wouldn't say nothin' 'bout it, Jed; cause Hessie mighten' like ter hev anyone know what she be a doin'. O'course, I don't min' a tellin' *you*. I know I kin trust yer."

"O'course yer kin," rejoined Jed with warmth. "O'course yer kin!"

They drove up to the stoop of the Blair farmhouse and Slack alighted.

"Comin' down ter th' store arter supper, Slacky?" inquired Jed.

"Yes, guess I will," replied Slack as he opened the door.

As Jed was about to drive away, Slack called after him, "Don't ferget! Mum's the word!"

"Don' yer be afeered Slacky—yer know me."

"Yes, dern yer," Slack uttered as he closed the door, "I do know yer, an' yer'll save me th' trouble er lyin' fifty times."

Millie was expecting Slack on the night train; but she had not heard the team drive up to the house. As Slack entered the room—he had come in by the side door—she was arranging the supper table. She held a cup in her hand, which, in her excitement at seeing Slack, she dropped, and the fragments spread themselves about on the

clean floor. She then did the most womanly, if not the most sensible thing under the circumstances, she sat on a chair and cried.

"There, Slack Dorkins," she sobbed, "yer've made me break my best china teacup, one as Hester brought from Gum'ny. I knowed as how yer couldn't come home 'thout somethin' happenin'." Then with a half stifled little sob of joy at seeing the fisherman at home again, she continued: "Be yer hungry, Slacky?" She was betraying feeling and interest verging on tenderness. This would not do. Still, he must be fed. Without waiting for a reply she hurried on excitedly: "Ef I'd a known sooner thet yer wer' a comin' home, I'd er hed somethin' outer common. The roosters er all sold off, an' I killed one er th' pullets. I jest hated ter, cause it was 'bout ready to lay. Sit right up, Slacky, I've some hot biscuit an' a cranberry pie, I *know* yer ain't hed eny cranberry pie sense yer bin in New York."

Millie approached the table, and Slack took her work-begrimed hand in his own. He kissed her lightly on the cheek. A maidenly blush overspread her face, then assuming her most severe expression of disapproval, she blurted out:

"Ther', Slacky, don't be foolish!" But she tingled with joy from her head to her feet; and the touch of the fisherman's lips on her cheek sent the blood surging through her veins. "Be

yer glad ter see me?" inquired Slack as he seated himself at the table.

"Yes, o'course I'm glad ter see yer; but I never spected yer'd get back 'thout gittin' in ter some kind er trouble. Try some er th' chicken pie, Slacky; but I ain't sure th' crust is quite done, though th' fire was hot enough, goodness knows!"

Slack needed no urging. For the past few days he had wrestled, unsuccessfully, with the railroad sandwich; and it needed only the sight of the well-supplied and scrupulously neat table, to awaken a healthy appetite. Millie seated herself opposite the fisherman, and, while her eyes rested with loving concern on the bulky form before her,—taking care, however, that she should not be surprised into a betrayal of her feelings—she settled herself comfortably to hear the news.

"Now, Slacky, tell me about Hessie." In her usual impetuous manner she did not wait for a reply—"What a pity that Mr. Featherly died. He wer' th' neatest man in his room I ever seed! Not a speck o' dust; an' his clothes always hung up! Why, it wer' nothin' 'tall ter take keer of his room. What a pity he died!"

Slack chuckled quietly. No allusion as yet to his hair. He cast a furtive glance at the mirror and shuddered. However, a few minutes' respite was something. He'd enjoy it.

"Well," he began——

He was interrupted by a knock at the door, which opened almost immediately and John Cary entered.

Slack held out his hand, which Cary grasped.

"Sit down an' hev some supper, John," Millie urged.

"Only a cup of tea," John replied, as he seated himself at the table, "had supper an hour ago."

John turned to the fisherman. "When did you arrive?" he asked.

"On the night train," Slack replied.

"An' he hasn't told me a word 'bout Hessie," Millie protested.

"How could I?" demanded Slack, "when yer've been a stuffin' me with this chicken pie, th' whole time! Not but that I wer' willin' 'nough; but I couldn't talk an' eat too. Howsom'ever," he continued looking John in the eyes, "when I left New York, Hessie wer' fust rate."

A glance passed between the two men. They understood each other.

"O, how I'd like ter see dear Hessie!" Millie said plaintively. "John, try one o' the muffins. I made 'em from a new receipt Sally Hopkins gin me. I d'know how they've turned out. I always found it safest ter foller yer own receipt." She turned to Slack. "How do Hessie look?"

"O," replied the unblushing Slack, "bout's common. Don't yer think so, John?"

"Yes," replied John in an even tone.

"Dear, dear Hessie," there were tears in Millie's voice. She observed that John wasn't eating.

"John, *do* try a small piece o' thet cranberry pie."

John protested; Millie urged; and Slack, knowing that his escape from nightmare, and perhaps apoplexy, was due to John's timely arrival, grinned, and watched the combat between the two.

Millie won the day; and John, with the best grace at his command, ate the cranberry pie. Not content with his too ready surrender, he smilingly assured Millie that he was really hungry for it after all.

"How be Hessie a doin' with her music?" demanded Millie.

Slack launched forth with a glowing account of Hester's success, recounted many incidents of her musical career, and finished with an opinion expressed with convincing candor, "that he was afeered thet she would overwork; still," he continued, "she wer' a lookin' well an' never seemed ter min' th' work anyhow."

John listened with well concealed amazement to the voluble fisherman. His heart beat with gratitude, for he realized the fixed determination of this guardian of Hester's fair name. When Slack had finished eating, John rose, and, as he passed him, laid his hand on the fisherman's brown, hairy fist that rested on the table. Noth-

ing was said between them; and with a sigh of contentment, they lighted the cigars which John produced. Well as John knew Slack, he could not but regard him with added and wondering admiration. He realized that however well guarded the events of the past week, that sooner or later, the truth would find its way to Norton. It was not the truth he feared, but the vicious comment that Hester's conduct and relations with Featherly would occasion. He felt the utmost confidence in Slack's discretion and judgment. He knew whatever the final verdict, that for the present, at least, Slack would lose no time in laying the foundation to counteract whatever ill reports that might have gained credence among the village people.

Millie's searching glance took in every detail of the fisherman's dress. He felt her cold, critical eyes upon him, and shifted uneasily in his chair. What was amiss with him, he wondered? His hand sought his cravat. It was askew. He fumbled his waistcoat, and the knowledge that the button had been off for the past week filled him with guilty confusion. The stains on the front of his best coat seemed to speak, and stood out in disgusting relief. He puffed nervously at his cigar, and drove dense clouds of smoke into the air to hide his shortcomings; for he well knew that the comfort of smoking would be denied him if John were not there.

Millie went about clearing the table, with one

threatening eye fixed on the offender. He racked his brain for excuses, but only one worthy of consideration presented itself—who could be expected to comb their hair on a railway car? With the courage of this logic he glanced timidly at Millie. Her eyes were fixed upon him with chilly disapproval.

"It's a lucky thing for some folks that they come home." Her voice was cutting. She stood beside the table and spoke with distressing clearness, "I don't believe yer hed a sock darned sense yer bin away. Jest look at thet coat es were bran new when yer left hum! John, will yer look et it!" She cast an appealing glance at John, who manifested becoming interest, and, as far as he could, bestowed a look of stern disapproval at the wearer of the "brand new coat."

Millie, with a sigh of resignation, picked up some dishes from the table. John smiled, and cast a commiserating glance at the offender, whose eyes twinkled merrily.

"What a shame," she went on, "an' he paid twelve dollars fer thet suit. I know Sam Prouty cheated him; an' I'm glad uv et, 'longs he don' know 'nough ter take proper keer ef it. Sam Prouty may be a deacon, an' hev th' best pew in th' church; but *I* know no true Christian would charge such prices as he do."

Here was a subject they could agree upon, and Slack nodded his head in acquiescence.

"Goin' 'long ter th' village, John?" inquired

Slack, before Millie could discover further cause for criticism.

"Yes," John answered, "as far as the office."

"Well," drawled Slack in a quizzical tone, "yer see, th' boys know by this time thet I've got home, 'n sooner 'n hev 'em lay awake all night, I thought as how I'd go down ter th' village, an' enlighten 'em on some pints I s'pect they'd like ter know. Er course th' ain't 'nquisitive er anything like thet! May be it's because they hev a pursonal interest in my doin's."

"Well," retorted Millie, who had listened to the latter part of Slack's remarks, "I wouldn't go a galavanting down ter th' store ef I was *you*. I do believe the men folks gossip more 'n any ole woman in th' village."

Slack smiled. He recognized the truth of her remarks.

"I won't be late, Millie, 'n I'll shet up th' house when I git back."

Millie persisted that "she couldn't fer th' life ef her see th' sense in it," and her querulous voice followed the two men into the starlit night.

CHAPTER XIII

SALLY PITTS ASKS QUESTIONS OF SLACK

Clear is the night, the snow gleams bright,
The moonbeams dance far out to sea.
To a lover's sigh, night breezes die;
And the stars blink down in ecstasy.

S LACK and his companion walked slowly, conversing in earnest tones. A full moon sailed majestically in a star-besprinkled sea of blue. Not a sound broke the stillness, except the footsteps of the two men, that crushed the snow in a series of sharp, metallic echoes. The wood smoke from the chimneys of the village, ascended straight heavenward. The lights, from the half-curtained windows of the cottages, flickered feebly, dwarfed into insignificant glimmerings by the sheen-like brilliancy without. Beyond the harbor, that was partly coated with thin ice, the rippled surface of the water threw back a million gleams of sparkling silver, that danced, gnome-like, to the resplendent moon.

As Slack and his companion reached the main street, John, with a cheery, "good-night," turned in the direction of his office, and Slack proceeded on his way to the village store.

When opposite the church he heard his name

called softly; and he stopped abruptly. It was a weak, piping little voice, but it had the power to arrest the fisherman, and he responded without hesitancy.

"Why, dear little Sally! What er yer doin' at th' church at this hour?"

"O, I'm so glad ter see you again, Slacky!" Sally rejoined.

She took his hand that he extended to her and pressed it to her cheek. She continued:

"Come into the church with me a little while, Slacky, will you? O, it's lovely when the moon shines through the windows."

Slack dearly loved the child. He knew her odd ways, and her request did not in the least surprise him. She was unlike other children,—unlike anyone he had ever known. She lived in a little world of her own, peopled by fanciful ideas and images, that were as real to her as were those with whom she came in daily contact. Her home life, which had been dreary in the extreme, only intensified her longing for solitude. Slack, holding the child's hand in his own, entered the church, and they seated themselves near the door, where the moonlight, streaming through the stained-glass windows, bathed them in a flood of fantastic colors.

"Isn't this beautiful?" the child asked.

"Why yes," answered the prosaic fisherman, "but it 'pears ter me ter be a bit lonesome. Why der yer come here, Sally, ain't yer a feered?"

"O my, no," she laughed. It was a musical little outburst of mirth that vibrated through the empty church. "I'm never afraid. When I'm here alone I think such beautiful things. Don't you ever, Slacky?"

"Well yes," answered Slack dubiously, "when I hev a good summer's ketch er fish, er Millie ain't cranky, er somethin' like thet; don't know but I do."

Sally's laugh came back in rippling echoes.

"O, I don't mean that! Don't you ever see beautiful things when you are alone sometimes?"

"Em," ejaculated the fisherman, "yer know, Sally, thet my eyesight ain't as good as it used ter be. P'r'aps thet's th' reason thet I don' see things."

Young as Sally was, she realized that her companion was too material to understand what was to her another life. She turned the current of their conversation.

"Do people always get married in church?" she asked.

"Not allus," he replied, "but it's quite common."

"Tell me what they do when they get married."

"Well, bein' as how I never had any exper'ence, I d'know as I kin."

"They come in at the door and walk into the vestry?"

"S'pose they do," he muttered.

"And when they are married, the minister gives them a paper?"

"Yes, thet's a marriage certif'ket."

"What's thet for?"

"Why thet's ter show thet they've been married."

From the certificate to Hester and the latest tidings she had gleaned of her, was a circle that the child's active mind quickly traversed. She looked up into the eyes of her companion that beamed affectionately upon her.

"I saw Jed to-night," she said, after a momentary pause.

"Did yer?" queried Slack with manifest interest, "what did he hev ter say?"

"Told me all about Hessie."

"Did he? Em—" the tone of the ejaculation spoke volumes.

"Yes," continued the child, as if recounting some rare good fortune of her own, "how Hessie is playin' all the time, and making lots of money! O, I'm so glad!"

Slack patted her on the head with a woman's gentleness, and taking one of her wasted little hands in his own, fondled it caressingly. The clock in the belfry struck the hour of eight.

"I must be a goin' ter th' store, Sally. Ben't yer goin' home? It's late."

"Yes," she answered.

They walked slowly up the aisle of the church. As they neared the door Sally paused.

"Slacky, if we were going to be married, we'd walk right down this aisle to the vestry."

"Yes," answered the wondering Slack.

"There would be two men with the minister, and he would read out of a book—"

"Yes," interjected Slack encouragingly.

"The minister would give me a—what did you call it, Slacky?"

"Certif'ket."

"That's it," she continued; "and if it was dark, the minister would hold the light for us to go out."

"S'pose he would," agreed her companion.

"And when we were going out we would stop to put on my cloak here, and if I dropped the certif'ket—"

"Then I s'pose yer'd pick it up agin," interrupted the practical fisherman.

"But suppose I didn't know that I dropped it?"

"O, thet would be different."

"And suppose a little girl like me was sitting in that seat and saw me drop the paper."

"Then she'd pick it up and give it ter yer."

"But suppose we were running away, and didn't want the little girl to know; and we didn't know the little girl was there? What should she do with the paper, Slacky?"

In her excitement Sally grasped her companion's hand in both her own. Her eyes shone like coals of fire; and the moonlight intensified the pallor of her face, giving to it an uncanny expression that startled her companion. He believed it to be one of her odd, childish fancies, and was willing to humor her. He replied:

"Well, p'r'aps the little girl would keep it, and if we ever wanted it she'd hev it safe."

A sigh of satisfaction preceded her answer. "I knew you'd say that, Slacky. Come, let us go."

They passed out of the church to the street.

As they neared the store Slack bade the child an affectionate good-night. "Come up ter th' house ter-morrer an' I'll tell yer all 'bout New York."

"Will you, Slacky? O aren't you good!"

Her eyes danced with expectancy; and her feet barely touched the snow covered ground as she ran down the street.

Slack stood at the door before entering. He knew only too well the ordeal he had to face. He could tell to a man those whom he would meet; he could almost hear their voices as they speculated on his doings while in New York.

The village people were endowed with all the weaknesses of untutored minds that isolation from the world breeds. Their scope of intercourse was narrow, and their intellects were contracted to conform to their surroundings. They

placed themselves on a moral plane far above their ability to maintain, and viewed their fellows with unwarranted severity. They were so far like their betters as to assume virtues they did not possess, and to damn with vigor those unfortunate enough to fall under their displeasure. Wherein they were much like ordinary mortals. Their simple minds magnified a failing into a sin, and a sin into a crime. They nominated themselves judges; but their verdicts were tempered with neither discernment nor charity. Slack knew them,—he knew them well; and a life-long intimacy did not strengthen his regard for them—quite the contrary; and he held them—as a community—in contempt. But there were exceptions:—there always are. It is a sad doctrine that teaches us that all men are born equal. They may be in the sight of Heaven; but that they are not equal, in the eyes of the world, is becoming a fixed belief. And it is well. It is the exceptions that make life bearable, and act as a check to the consuming human passions. Give one a pure mind, tempered by charity, and Heaven is not far removed.

With these feelings in his heart, Slack opened the door and entered. He was met by a dense cloud of tobacco smoke and a vociferous volley of greetings. They all spoke at once. Each individual in the room endeavored to shake his hand at the same time; while each in his turn offered his seat to the urbane Slack, whose fea-

tures were wreathed in an impenetrable smile. His aggravatingly calm exterior had an air of alertness, an expectancy of attack. He was on the defensive.

Capt. Edwards began the discussion with:

"How's New York and how be Hesse a doin'?"

"Well's could be expected in such a short time; tolerable well," was the nonchalant reply.

Here was a divergence at the outset from Jed's glowing account of Hester's success. Being familiar with Slack's habit of withholding facts concerning the Blair family, it only confirmed their belief that Jed's version was the more authentic.

Slack watched the effect of his answer with satisfaction. There was a look of "we know more about it than you think we do," stamped on every countenance, while the fishermen exchanged glances. He chuckled inwardly, but his features retained their sphinx-like expression.

"How did yer find New York?" queried the captain.

"Middlin'," was the off hand answer, "o' course my stay wa'n't long 'nough ter get acquainted with th' fust families; still I got ter know a few."

"How's the fellers yer hed ter work with?" demanded Portuguese Joe.

"Tip-top," answered Slack warmly. "Mr. Featherly hed a coachman who used ter drive

fer Queen Victory. Me an' 'm wer' thicker 'n six in a bed."

"Is thet so!" exclaimed Joe.

"O yes," Slack's voice was tinged with regret. "I hated ter part with 'im, he wer' so entertainin'. We wer' jest like two brothers."

"An' th' Bowery? How wer' it?" laughed Capt. Edwards, "Bad's they say it is?"

"Jest as quiet as the main street of the village," replied Slack, "used ter tend th' gospel meetin's there most every night."

"Then they must tell some consarned lies about it!" rejoined Joe. "Why," he continued with warmth, "Ned Hasting, as used ter belong ter th' life-savin' station—he afterwards shipped on a four-master—tole me with his own mouth, as how he got paid off, an' hed two hundred dollars a comin' ter 'im. They unloaded in New York, an' Ned kinder thought he'd like ter see the Bowery. He strolled down ther' nine or ten o'clock one night, an' how long d'yer think thet two hundred dollars lasted?"

None dared venture a guess, and Joe continued: "Jest two hours! He found himself fust in th' gutter, then in th' lockup, 'n he didn' hev a copper. He tried to argue with the policeman thet he had bin robbed, an' it took four stitches ter sew up his head when the officer got through clubbin' 'im."

"I found them most agreeable," Slack quietly remarked. "They be nearly all Down Easters;

leastwise those I met wer'. They tole me so. One feller stepped up ter me an' said: 'Hello Hiram.' I asked 'im how in thunder he knowed my name. He said, 'I used ter know yer "Down East" years ago.' O, he were real kind! Sort er took an interest in me from th' start; an' I felt just the same toward him. He offered ter show me th' sights, 'n 'fore I left 'm, yer'd jest hev ter pull us apart. It wer' like my partin' from the coachman what drove for Queen Victory."

Slack failed to add that it required Mr. Featherly's influence, and a liberal sum of money, to extricate him from the trouble. What did more, perhaps, was the fact that the friend who had known him "Down East" was a notorious tough,—a character well known to the police. After Slack's encounter with him, the accomodating stranger was in the hospital two weeks for repairs. But the fisherman considered it unnecessary to speak of these details.

"D'yer see any o' the folks as wer' down here last summer?" asked Capt. Edwards.

"Well," drawled Slack, "there was one as wanted ter be remembered ter yer, Captain."

"The widder," they yelled in chorus.

Capt. Edwards attempted to speak, but his voice was drowned in the uproar. When quiet was resumed Slack said:

"Yer won't hev ter guess agin."

"How wer' she lookin', Slacky?"

"Like a rose bush on a June day," he replied.

"Be she comin' here next summer?"

"Spect she be. Er course I don' know what'll happen 'fore thet time. She be a mighty good lookin' woman; an' she's hed three tries at it afore."

A simultaneous movement was made to adjourn for the night. They could discuss Slack's visit to New York more freely when he was not present; and the remainder of the long winter evenings were before them. The door was opened, and a flood of bright moon-light guided them into the night without.

CHAPTER XIV

LOVE GROWS NOT LESS BY WAITING

I'll keep all vows you ask for your dear sake
But one—to love you less—that will I break.

IT was the month of March following the death of Ralph Featherly.

Hester had taken up her abode in modest quarters on the west side of the city. The rooms, two in number, were neatly but inexpensively furnished, and were in marked contrast to the luxurious apartment she had occupied during the first few months of her stay in New York. She had succeeded in procuring the position of organist in one of the semi-fashionable churches, and her income, though not large, was more than sufficient for her modest wants. She had lived quietly for the past few months, seeing but few of her former friends. Mrs. Pendleton had called upon her, but glad as Hester was to see her, she did not encourage her visits.

Mrs. Pendleton had been aware of the attachment that existed between Hester and Featherly while they were at Norton. She had even encouraged it, and expressed the hope to Featherly that it would result in marriage. She loved Hester, and it was with keen disappointment

that she recognized her disinclination to keep up more than a formal acquaintance. Hester appreciated Mrs. Pendleton's trust in her, but she wished to be alone; for intercourse with her former friends only kept alive the sorrow and humiliation she had gone through.

John Cary, however, was a regular visitor; but he was forced to content himself with one weekly call. He made the most of these, trusting that time would bring to Hester peace of mind and the happiness of former years. The world had gone well with him, and he had advanced with rapid strides in the shipping office where he was employed.

There was a tacit understanding between Hester and John, that they would not in any way allude to the past; and a further agreement, that he was not to speak to her of love. It was no easy matter for him to conform to this arrangement; but he struggled manfully, though not with entire success. It pained Hester to see his unalterable devotion; and, realizing his faith in her, it touched her, as nothing else could do.

She was much occupied with her duties as organist, and the remainder of her time she devoted to study, and to works of charity. These were so quietly and secretly performed, that but few knew of them. She had associated herself with a committee from the church, whose duty it was to seek out and assist worthy cases for charity; and it was John's weekly call that broke

the endless routine. She grudgingly granted his request that he might come to see her; but it was not long before she began to look forward to his visits as an essential part of her life. When she thought of his love that had remained steadfast through all these years, when she considered that his faith in her had never wavered during her life with Featherly, though appearances were such as might warrant him in condemning her, her heart beats quickened, and a sigh of gratitude, tinged with a tenderer emotion, would escape her.

On the mantel over the open fireplace was his photograph, between her own and Ethel's, and she would often stand before it and gaze at his handsome, open countenance. He was the same to-day as when they had climbed the bluff at Norton, or had romped together as school fellows,—frank, generous to a fault, with a keen sense of justice, and the highest of chivalric honor. It was during the past few months that she realized his true worth. She now appreciated his love—constant in its loyalty, and unselfish in its manly devotion. She did not, however, encourage him. She knew, only too well, the stigma that had been cast upon her name,—that the world would judge her by appearances only; and that it was her misfortune that these were against her. She had anticipated the time when John would renew his offer of marriage, and was firmly determined to discourage his suit. It was not of herself that she thought, but

of him. She felt that the cloud that was on her name would cling to her through life, and in after years rise, ghost-like, between them.

It was late in the afternoon of the early spring. John had called at Hester's rooms and had been informed by the janitress that Hester was not at home. He left a small basket of fruit, saying he would come again later in the day. He had gone but a few minutes when the door bell rang, and Fenton was admitted to the outer hall. He mounted the stairs and knocked at Hester's door. Miss Healy, the janitress, was in the room preparing Hester's supper. She opened the door, and Fenton, without an invitation, entered.

Miss Healy was a spinster of about five and forty years, with a florid, open countenance. An air of good-natured aggressiveness dominated her. She took care of Hester's rooms, and filled the position of housekeeper and general servant. She was blunt and outspoken; feared neither man, woman nor child; yet withal, a kindhearted creature thoroughly devoted to Hester.

She looked Fenton over suspiciously. She was not pleased with his appearance or manner of entering. She stood in front of him and scowled her displeasure.

"What the divil d'yer want comin' in this way without bein' ast?" she demanded.

Fenton favored her with a patronizing stare.

"My dear Mrs.—"

"I'm no Mrs. if yer plaze. I'm a Miss sor, an'

as yer not good at guessin', my name's Healy, and I'm the janitress. Now what's yer name, an' what der yer want?"

"Ah, my dear *Miss Fealy*—"

"Healy, sor, Healy," she roared with rising anger.

"Healy, to be sure. I called to see Miss Blair."

"Well," came the reply, "ef yer eyesight is anyways good, yer'll see that she's not at home."

Fenton took a bank bill from his pocket and handed it to the astonished Healy. It was of large denomination and represented, to her, a month's wages. In his most conciliatory tone he said:

"I'm sorry to have caused you so much trouble, Miss Healy. The fact is, I'm a friend of Miss Blair, and I wished to give her a little surprise. As she is not at home, I prefer that you say nothing of my visit. I will call again."

Miss Healy looked at the money which she held in her hand, then at Fenton. She muttered:

"A twenty dollar bill! Sure that man must be crazy!"

Nothing escaped Fenton's observation:—the plain furnishings, the modest side-board, the few common chairs and the one rocking chair.

"Not particularly luxurious," he muttered under his breath. He approached the table on which was the basket of fruit. "Em," he

mused, "lives well! Peaches at two dollars a dozen! A church organist can hardly afford it."

Miss Healy followed his movement. "A present from Mr. Cary," she said, as Fenton seemed interested. He looked up quickly.

"Does he call often?" he asked.

"'Bout onct a week," she replied.

Fenton turned to the sideboard and, unseen by Miss Healy, one of his gloves dropped to the floor. He walked toward the door.

"Miss Healy," he said, "I knew Miss Blair before she came to New York. I can trust you to say nothing of my visit until I call again?"

"Sure," she replied, "I suppose there's no harrum done in sayin' nothin'."

"Quite so," he replied, "After I have seen Miss Blair she will explain. Good-day, Miss Healy." The door closed after him and he was gone.

Miss Healy stood motionless for some time. She was not entirely satisfied that she had done right. Twenty dollar bills were not given to servants without some adequate return. Of that, she was certain. What did he expect of her? To say nothing to Hester of his call? She argued that there could be no great harm in remaining silent. If a doubt as to his honest intention crossed her mind, the sight of the bill she held in her hand dispelled it; and the cupidity with which most human beings are endowed, varying only in degree, soothed her conscience, and the material part of her nature triumphed.

"I guess it's all right," she muttered, "anyhow I'll kape th' money."

A knock at the door startled her.

"Come in," she called. John entered.

"Not home yet!" he said, "I'll wait."

Miss Healy went out by the rear entrance.

John walked about the room. He inspected the articles in a work basket that lay on a small table. "A woman's paradise," he said softly, handling the contents caressingly. He turned in the direction of the mantel, and seeing Fenton's glove on the floor, picked it up and examined it carefully.

"A gentleman's glove," he mused, "and of the finest quality:—slender fingers, small hand, and a distinct odor of lavender. I detest perfumes when affected by men; but men don't affect them. Males perhaps, men—no." He looked at the glove closely and spoke:

"Name inside? No, initials only. G. H. F. Now who has been here since Hester went out? Someone, surely; otherwise the glove wouldn't be on the floor. Well, it's not for me to say; but I'll keep the glove."

He walked to the mantel and took his photograph from the wire bracket.

"And that's my humble self!" He laughed softly, "a revised edition, edited by my New York tailor, with foot notes by the artist photographer. It flatters me until I blush at the fraud. Heigh-ho! My taste must be depraved;

for after all, I prefer the homely Norton clothing, creaseless trousers and all."

He replaced his photograph and looked at Ethel's. "Dear little Ethel," there was a note of tenderness in his voice, "with the eyes of innocence that penetrate one's very soul." He took Hester's portrait in his hands and held it before him. He was standing in front of a mirror which was directly opposite the door that led to the front hall. He looked at the portrait long and intently. He did not hear the door open, or see Hester who had entered noiselessly. He spoke softly: "Dear Hester—" he saw her reflection in the mirror. She smiled.

"John dear, I don't mind your making love to my photograph, but remember your promise."

He took both her hands in his own as he answered:

"I am not allowed to forget it. I am curbed and bridled, both tongue and limb. But Hester dear, there are some words in the English language that I'd sooner not forget."

"John dear, it is better as it is; better that you do forget; and now," she continued as she laid her hat and wrap on the sofa, "a cup of tea."

She saw the fruit on the table and, shaking her finger at him, assumed her most severe tone.

"Peaches at this season of the year! What extravagance! If you continue it, you know the penalty."

"Expulsion, and all because of a few peaches!

Am I to be allowed nothing?" he asked with mock chagrin, "Not even to spend my salary as it pleases me?"

"I don't care how you spend your salary," she rejoined, "if you don't squander it on luxuries that I can very well do without." She paused in her tea making and surveyed him with proud interest. "And," she continued, "aren't you getting on famously in the office!"

"Yes," he answered ruefully, "but—"

"There, there, John dear, the tea is ready. Sit here." She motioned him to a chair opposite her.

"Do you know John, I feel quite elated. I was paid my salary to-day. O, money never seems so good as when you earn it! I counted it again and again."

"I'll warrant the church people parted with it reluctantly enough—like pulling teeth."

"Quite the contrary, John dear. They paid me with the utmost good grace, and complimented me for my playing. O, I feel quite proud; and I sent the money to pay for Ethel's school tuition."

"Brave little woman!" he exclaimed.

"I received a letter to-day from Norton. From whom do you think?"

"From Millie," he ventured.

"No, from Slack. I'll read it to you; that is, as much of it as I can decipher."

Hester took the letter from her pocket and read:

"Dear Hessie, I jest thought I'd write ter

yer, bein—bein—' I never can make that out, no, impossible!"

John rose and, placing his chair beside her, looked over her shoulder. "Let me see," he demanded.

They held the letter before them to read it. Their heads were close together. John continued:

"—As how yer heven't writ ter me.'"

"Of course!" Hester agreed, "how simple it looks now."

John's disengaged arm stole around her waist. She continued:

"'We be a waitin' fer—fer—'"

"'Summer time,'" John interjected, "'an' it do seem as though the Almighty wer—er—er—'"

"'Holdin'—'" John's cheek was within an inch of Hester's.

"'Onter th' days, they be so long in passin' a waitin' fer summer.'"

"What does he mean?" she asked.

"He's trying to tell you that the days seem long waiting for summer, when you go home to Norton."

"Dear Slack," murmured Hester. John moved his chair a little nearer. Hester proceeded.

"'Millie's a studyin' up a new cook book ter surprise yer. She's well, and able ter do her usual amount o' frettin'. Sally Hopkin's goin' ter marry Zeke Newcomb. Zeke, he ain't done a day's work fer five years. Good fer Zeke, I wish

I could get 'long thout it same's he do. No more
—no more—' ”

“ ‘ From— ’ ” John's breath as he spoke,
brushed Hester's cheek.

“ ‘ Old Slack, ’ ” concluded Hester.

“ But see! ” said John, “ there's a postscript! ”

“ To be sure, ” said Hester.

“ ‘ P. S. Afore I go inter th' house, I jest look
in at the winder, an' if Millie hes her lips pressed
—pressed— ’ ” “ Tight, ” volunteered John. As
if it were a gentle reminder, his arm tightened
around Hessie's waist. She continued:

“ ‘ —I jèst don' go inter the house at all. I
heven't combed my hair fer a week, 'cause it
makes Millie so dern mad. Yer shud hear her
go it.—Slack. ’ ”

John's cheek was pressed to Hester's. “ Let's
read it all over again, ” he said.

Hester laughed and motioned him to a seat op-
posite her.

“ I can get on very well alone, John, but isn't
that just like Slack? ”

John, with a regretful sigh, seated himself op-
posite.

“ One more cup of tea, ” she said, “ and I will
help you on with your coat. ”

“ So soon? ”

“ Yes, I must play at the church to-night. ”

“ And I'll go and listen, and love you from the
far end of the church. You don't object to that,
do you, Hester? ”

"No," she laughed, "not with the length of the church between us."

She assisted him to put on his coat. When it was on, he turned quickly, and folding his arms about her held her close to him.

"Don't John," she protested, while the blood rushed to her cheek and neck, "remember your promise."

"Hester dear, love promises are made to be broken. I am neither ice nor stone, but a strong man, with a strong man's love. I can't go on seeing you week after week and suppress my feelings."

"John," she answered sadly, "you make it harder for both of us. If you persist, I shall have to deny myself the one comfort left me—that of seeing you. I know dear friend, your worth. I wish to keep you near me, but we must go on as we are, without change, without hope."

He kissed her on the cheek and released her.

"There Hester," he said, "perhaps I shall do better in the future, but don't ask me to make any more promises, for I shall surely break them."

With a parting "good-bye" he was gone.

CHAPTER XV

“ I AM THE DAUGHTER OF HENRY BLAIR ”

Fear lives not but in hearts that's tuned to shame,
Distrust, and self-abasement; nor can bastard
Courage counterfeit the ring of truth.
'Tis not enough to say, such is, or is
Not so. The eye, the voice and gesture lend
To truth the evidence that make or mar
Plain speaking It were better we were dumb,
Than tongue should play the knave's part and betray us.

AFTER John had left her, Hester stood for some minutes thinking. She knew the depth of his love; she felt that it was his life, his very existence. She shuddered, for she realized that the time would come when she would be forced to give him an answer. She walked to the mantel, and, looking lovingly at his portrait, spoke softly:

“ Dear John, there isn't a woman in the land but would be proud to possess your love. Noble, noble John! ”

With a sigh she went about her work. She cleared the tea table and carried the dishes into the adjoining room, where Miss Healy would find them when she did her work. After arranging the furniture,—as it was too early to go to church,—she busied herself with some fancy needle work. Her mind reverted to her home;

and she mentally counted the weeks and the days until she should start for Norton. She longed to see her sister; yet it was with misgivings that she considered her return. As for herself, she knew the village gossips would not spare her; and since the night of her husband's death, when John had told her what they said, she could not think of her return without a feeling of dread that life would be made intolerable. But when she thought of the inmates of her own home—her own family, for Slack and Millie she considered of the family—her courage returned. John was a bulwark of strength, to stand between her and the venom-dipped tongues that would assail her name. But more than all, the consciousness that before God she was pure, gave her added courage to brave the ordeal. It was not alone her promise that deterred her from a declaration of her marriage. All evidences of it had been destroyed. The Rev. Dr. Coulton was dead; the witnesses,—seamen on her husband's yacht—had disappeared; the records of the parsonage had been destroyed by fire; and her unsupported word was all she had to offer. This, without further proof, she knew to be insufficient. But even if the proof were obtainable, she would not have produced it. Her promise not to disclose her marriage she held sacred; doubly so since the death of her husband.

These thoughts filled her mind when she was startled by a knock at the door. It was an event

for any one to call and it occurred to her that perhaps John had returned.

"Come in," her voice was unsteady.

Fenton hurriedly entered the room, closing the door behind him.

He was the last person in the world whom Hester expected to see, and it was some moments before she recovered from her astonishment. She had always disliked him. She had, however, during her husband's lifetime, never mentioned his name when she could avoid it. Knowing that a friendship of long standing had existed between the two men, and Fenton having been guarded in his conduct toward her, she had remained silent.

He stood within the room. The silence became embarrassing.

"Mr. Fenton!" her voice betrayed some emotion.

"I hardly expected that you'd remember me," he answered with a smile.

Hester had risen at his entrance, "Pardon me if I do not ask you to be seated," she said, "I do not receive company here." Her tone was chilly in the extreme.

He smiled blandly as he answered, "I discovered only to-day where you lived. I realize that since poor Featherly's death you've been in a sort of mourning as it were—"

The tone of his voice was half mocking. Hester's blood tingled in her veins.

"Well," she said.

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“You see,” he continued, “St. Ruth’s Church is built on land leased from my estate.”

“Your estate!” echoed Hester. The words had escaped her involuntarily.

“Yes, I learned to-day that you were organist there. You see, Miss Blair, I have always taken an interest in you. I—”

“Pray be brief,” interrupted Hester.

As he looked at her, an insolent smile played about the corners of his mouth. So far as her present occupation was concerned, she felt that she was completely at his mercy.

He had come to Hester’s room with the fixed determination to ruin her in the eyes of church authorities, if other means failed. His wealth and the influence of his social position, made him a power in church circles, and with the consciousness of his position he answered her:

“Miss Blair, I have always been interested in your welfare. You should move in a different atmosphere—”

“I am quite content, Mr. Fenton. I—”

“Pardon me,” he interrupted, “with your beauty and your exceptional accomplishments, you should—”

“And is this what you came to say to me?” There was a note of anger tinged with sorrow in her voice.

Nothing daunted he continued:

“You see, Miss Blair, I have a very fine establishment in the city, I wish to offer you—”

“To offer me—” she repeated.

A less confident man would have been warned by the tone of her voice. Her eyes blazed. She stood erect.

Fenton was slow to perceive, and slower still to believe that one struggling with the world for a bare subsistence, would turn away from the life he was about to offer her. In his blind egotism, Hester's self-restraint encouraged him. He took it for a sign of her weakness, and, emboldened by what he considered the progress he was making, answered:

“Exactly! We begin to understand each other. I am rich. I can give you every comfort, every luxury. I offer you my protection—”

“Just Heaven!” Hester exclaimed in a voice that was freighted with agony. “Have I not suffered enough? Is there in store for me further humiliation? Must I again undergo the scourge to crush the little life and hope that yet remains? Just God! have I sinned against Thee, and is this my punishment?”

Hester, while speaking, seemed unconscious of the presence of Fenton. The muscles of her face twitched convulsively. There was a drawn look about the mouth that told the suffering she was undergoing. Fenton's voice aroused her.

“Miss Blair—”

“Don't, don't,” she cried, “in Heaven's name, don't!” there was a threatening ring in her voice that filled the room.

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“Be reasonable!” he exclaimed. “Our interests are one, or should be. I offer you every advantage that money can give.”

“You offer me but shame, humiliation!” With blazing eyes she pointed to the door. “Go, in Heaven’s name, go!”

“And you refuse my friendship?” Fenton asked with a sneer?”

“Refuse!” she laughed bitterly, mockingly. “Would to God I had power to rend you limb from limb. You coward.”

“Very heroic,” sneered Fenton, “but you were not so punctilious as to your virtue, when you lived with Featherly as his—” Fenton leaned forward and hissed the word through his clenched teeth.

“Ah!” she retorted vehemently, “Before all the world I say it is a lie!”

“Do you think the music lesson scheme deceived me?” He took a step toward her then continued: “Come, let us not quarrel, listen to reason.” He approached as if to touch her. She shrank from him.

“Don’t,” her tone was one of disgust, “your touch would congeal the blood in my veins, and turn my heart to stone. I have nothing to reproach myself with. I have wronged no one; I, and I alone, have been the sufferer. Heaven in good time will prove the truth of my words.”

“When it comes to a struggle for daily bread, Heaven lends but cold comfort; nor does it in-

sure positions to church organists. You will beg for my protection, and that before long."

A look of conscious strength overspread Hester's features. She looked him straight in the eyes. She was without fear, and her voice that had rung through the room in the first moments of her excitement, was now even and passionless.

"Enough," she said, "I am not of that order of creature that can be cowed, frightened or whipped into subjection. I have the physical and moral courage of an honest woman. Don't think any persecution that your vileness may suggest would induce me to look upon you with anything but loathing; or that your wealth could turn me from the path of duty. My heart and my life are open to God and the world. I am the daughter of Henry Blair; strong in my love of that name, yet stronger in my faith and trust in Heaven. God's justice will yet overtake me, and find me unsullied in mind and body, true to my father's name and to myself. Go!"

Fenton walked leisurely to the door and with his hand on the knob turned and looked disdainfully at her. She stood erect, the tips of her fingers resting on the table. Her eyes flashed, otherwise she was as calm as if she were addressing the pastor or one of the committee of the church. Though a sympathetic word would have unnerved her, before this ordeal of shame her courage was supreme. Where an ordinary woman would have recourse to tears, Hester's courage came to

her relief; and she faced the man before her with a calmness that was nearly superhuman. She was absolutely without fear: only her eyes betraying her excitement and the determined struggle she was making to retain her self control. Fenton opened the door. With a sneering laugh he spoke:

“Very pretty, though a little tragic. I trust you don’t affect that style often. You can’t expect that sort of rot to impress me to any marked degree. I’ve seen that type of heroics before. It is what we term the first stage. After our next meeting you will be in a different frame of mind. Adieu, until to-night.”

His mocking laugh came through the door when it closed behind him, and rang in her ears long after he had gone.

Hester remained standing behind the table. Her face wore a drawn expression. She appeared years older than she had looked an hour previous.

“O, the shame!” she spoke almost inaudibly, “the shame, the shame! Am I in the eyes of the world a thing, a creature? Will all men look on me as a chattel; all pure women pass me with averted heads, fearing that my presence will contaminate them? Must I go through life pointed at as an outcast? My sister—”

Tears shone in her eyes as she thought of Ethel. She clasped her hands together, and with an effort controlled her emotions. The agony of a lifetime was concentrated into the few moments

that she stood thus. She spoke again in a half whisper:

"Until to-night. What does he mean? He is connected with the church. Heaven doesn't insure positions to church organists. Must I again have my heart wrung? Ah!" she exclaimed in a sorrowful voice, "my fatal promise!"

She crossed the room and took Cary's portrait in her hand.

"God grant that you may be near me."

She spoke the words with the solemnity of a prayer; then replacing the portrait in its place, glanced at the clock on the mantel. With nervous energy she put on her cloak and hat and went out.

Hester's footsteps were echoing in the hallway, when the door leading to the rear entrance was cautiously opened, and Miss Healy's head was thrust into the aperture. Her shoulders and the upper part of her body followed, and she peered into the room. Her face was a study. Rage and chagrin were depicted on her generously endowed features. Her eyes, feet and hands danced in unison as she swung herself into the room. It was painfully evident that she was not pleased,—that she was, in fact, in a towering passion. It is hardly necessary to state, that it was Miss Healy's interest in Hester's affairs that prompted her to remain outside the door of the rear entrance, with her ear in close proximity to the

key-hole, during Hester's interview with Fenton. It was a favorite occupation of hers when Hester had visitors. She soothed her conscience with the argument that the safety of her lodgers was of paramount importance, necessitating a closer intimacy with their concerns than could be gleaned from her own quarters on the first floor. Perhaps she was right. Be that as it may, she danced several intricate steps in the center of the room, before her power of speech, which, seemingly, had been paralyzed by her wrath, returned. She made several attempts to articulate before her voice gladdened her ears, and set the modest pieces of china on the side-board jingling. The roar that followed could be compared to no known human sound.

After a series of “ Ohs,” ejaculated in every tone of the chromatic scale of the middle register, with her hands clenched in the air, she found words to ease her consuming wrath.

“ If I hed thot man now, I'd strangle him ! An' ter think thet I took the black-hearted divil's money ! ”

She threw the money Fenton gave her on the floor, and danced upon it long and frantically. Gasping for breath, she continued: “ O, he'll cum agin ; an' I'll mate 'im as swate as a glass o' nictar ; an' when I hev 'im half way up thim three flights uv stairs, Oh ! ” she emphasized her ejaculation with a scuffle of her feet—“ I'll kick

'im into the street! I'll walk on 'im, an' I'll jump on 'im! Oh, oh, oh! The devil fly away wid 'im!" And with this final and terrible imprecation she fled from the room.

CHAPTER XVI

MRS. ST. JUST AND MRS. HOUSEMAN EXCHANGE CONFIDENCES

They cooed and smiled, as the time they whiled,
In blasting some fair name.
Foul pomp! foul pride! The angels sighed,
And Charity wept for shame.

THE shades of a brilliantly clear evening were closing in upon the city, and night, usurping the last, lingering gleams in the western sky, held sway; disputed only by the stars, that struggled one by one, to replace the beauty of the dying glow of a golden sunset.

The doors of St. Ruth's church were thrown wide open, and the tones of the organ, in waves of harmony, greeted the congregation as they entered.

The services were in progress some minutes, when two ladies entered the antechamber that connected the church edifice with the adjoining parsonage. This room was used as a committee-room and office, where the business of the church was transacted. Double doors opened from the antechamber to the main edifice, and commanded, when open, a full view of the church interior.

Mrs. St. Just, the elder of the two was fash-

ionably dressed. She was a woman of doubtful age, of good figure, and haughty carriage. Her features wore an expression of settled calm. Her eyes were of a cold steel blue, and her voice was chilling in its metallic evenness. She seemed devoid of feeling or passion, and whether natural or affected, her manner was that of a woman of the world who found little in it to interest her. Her companion, Mrs. Houseman, though younger, was not so well preserved, and her unnatural color added nothing to her severely plain features. She was gowned with an eye to effect; and her appearance indicated the fashionable woman, who, at some period of her life, had enjoyed the world to its utmost.

Mrs. St. Just opened the door a few inches and peered into the church. A flood of music filled the room, dying to an echo as she closed the door.

"She plays divinely," she said, turning to her companion, "pity we must lose her."

"True," replied Mrs. Houseman, "but the morals of the congregation must not be endangered. 'Tis ever thus," she continued with a sigh, "get some one who is entirely satisfactory and—presto! you discover that a leaf in the book of their past life has been soiled."

Mrs. St. Just peered again into the church. Mrs. Houseman looked over her shoulder.

"Did you ever see such a fright as Mrs. Thorncroft in that bonnet?"

"Horrible," whispered her companion, "such shocking bad taste. She must be color blind!"

"Who is that with the Hadleys?"

"Don't know. Stunning, isn't he?"

"Distinguished looking, to say the least."

"Will you look at the fit of that Brownly girl's dress. I do believe she made it herself."

"Just what I said when I first saw it," replied the younger woman, "She says it's 'a Worth.' She brought it with her from Europe last summer."

"Horrors! It looks as if it were thrown at her."

Their eyes traversed the length of the church interior.

"There come the Sutherlys down the center aisle," murmured Mrs. St. Just sweetly, "pity someone doesn't teach the girls how to walk."

"How should they know?" replied Mrs. Houseman in an undertone, "It seems only yesterday that their father was herding cattle out west somewhere; as for their mother—"

"O!" exclaimed her companion in a tone of disgust, "she's simply impossible!"

A pause ensued. The voice of the pastor was exhorting his listeners to exercise true Christian charity. Mrs. St. Just closed the door abruptly.

"I detest that young Wakefield girl. She has the air of a princess."

"You know what they say?" demanded her

companion with the manner of one who has a choice morsel of news to reveal.

"No!" queried Mrs. St. Just eagerly.

Mrs. Houseman walked forward and whispered in her ear, then stepping back a few paces, waited for the expression of surprise that she knew would follow.

"With Col. Houghton! Clandestinely! Father doesn't know it?"

Mrs. Houseman purred softly and shook her head. This was to her a moment of exquisite pleasure. To think that she should be the first to inform Mrs. St. Just, who was accredited with knowing more of the secrets of the members of the congregation, than was good for any one person.

They smiled sweetly. Mrs. St. Just spoke:

"Em! I believed there was something back of that queenly manner. How long has this affair been going on?"

"O, for ever so long! Everyone is talking about it."

"When I meet her again, I'll give her the cut direct."

"Don't think of such a thing! They are immensely wealthy. Aren't you worldly enough to know that wealth has license?"

"True. One has no right to look into social windows that have golden shutters."

A pause. Then:

"Mr. Fenton is late."

"He may be waiting in the parsonage."

"No," the other rejoined, "he was to come here through the parsonage."

Mrs. St. Just opened the door cautiously, then turned to her companion.

"What a fright Mrs. Ide is getting to be. She looks fully fifty."

"She *says* she's thirty-six," replied Mrs. Houseman with a suppressed giggle.

"Helen, you'll make me laugh outright. *I'm* forty-six, and she was a young lady when I was in swaddling clothes."

She again turned to the door. Her companion threw her hands into the air, and with a look of resignation, murmured under her breath: "Forty-six!"

Mrs. St. Just turned to her companion.

"Helen, don't you think Mr. Fenton is manifesting an extraordinary interest in church matters, particularly——"

"Well?" queried Mrs. Houseman.

"In this matter of Miss Blair. You don't suppose——" began her companion.

"Dear me, I don't know. You remember that affair of his with Mrs.——"

"Sh!" exclaimed Mrs. Houseman, "He has returned to the path of duty. Besides, we were much in his company at one time; and it would hardly do for us to criticize——"

"You don't believe——"

"How unsophisticated you are. I never ex-

ercise my doubting faculties when an influential member of the church is concerned."

"Strange that he doesn't come."

"Don't worry, dear, his interest is too marked to delay him long."

The door leading to the parsonage opened and Fenton entered. Mrs. St. Just advanced to meet him.

"My dear Mr. Fenton! We almost despaired. We were discussing you as you entered."

"Yes," he replied, "and——"

"And rejoicing," cooed Mrs. Houseman, "in the active interest you take in church matters of late."

"I but follow your very good example," he said.

"How kind of you to say so," the ladies rejoined.

Fenton looked from one to the other and smiled. He had known them for more years than they would care to acknowledge; and, as he noted their expression of demure, studied calm, and contrasted it with certain episodes in their lives, it was with difficulty that he could restrain himself from giving way to an outburst of mirth. While he felt secure in his position, knowing that both the ladies, who had entire charge of the music of the church, would do his bidding, he did not wish to needlessly offend them. It was to them that Hester owed her position; and it must be through them that she should lose it. But their air of

meekness was too much for him and with ill-concealed pleasure at their discomfiture, he turned to Mrs. St. Just.

"Of course," he said, "the memories of old times obtrude themselves. The remembrance of those little suppers at Sherry's——"

"Please, *please* don't!" Mrs. St. Just's tone was indignant. Her companion suppressed a laugh.

"Or that little affair at Tuxedo."

Mrs. Houseman blinked at him knowingly; then in a shocked voice: "My *dear* Mr. Fenton!"

"That winter in the south of France," ventured Fenton.

"O dear me," chimed in Mrs. St. Just, "that was delightful. Ah, the divine climate, the beautiful Mediterranean stretching out before us, rivaled only by the azure sky—Nice with its marble palaces and Sunday services, so grand, so—so——" words failed, and a sigh, eloquent in its reminiscent regretfulness, filled the chamber.

"Yes," answered Fenton to this wave of feeling, "and Monte Carlo! and the little games of roulette we played!"

The heads and shoulders of both ladies were thrown back in dignified protestation.

"Please don't speak of that!" they exclaimed. In a lapse of caution, Mrs. Houseman continued:

"And that scandalous affair of Mrs. Von Etty! Cheating!"

"Sh!" expostulated Mrs. St. Just, holding her head very high and folding her hands, "we were younger then."

"Yes," laughed Fenton, "and much too giddy for pillars of the church."

"My dear Mr. Fenton, you forget," said Mrs. St. Just. Her tone betrayed virtuous indignation.

"O no," rejoined Fenton, "not at all. I remember a little dinner party on board my yacht that was quite upset, because one of the fair guests monopolized a certain lady's husband."

Mrs. St. Just forgot her studied calm, her high-standing in church circles, and the voice in which she answered was refreshingly natural.

"She was a little beast! I told her——"

"Quite so," Fenton blandly interrupted, "and that little affair at Newport. The flowers were misdirected, and the blundering messenger delivered them to the donor's wife by mistake. There was a note hidden among the forget-me-nots."

Mrs. Houseman turned away to hide a smile. Mrs. St. Just had been walking up and down the room, lashing herself into a passion. As Fenton finished, she paused in her walk and faced him. Her eyes flashed the scorn she could not utter.

A sigh of commiseration from the other member of the committee developed into a suppressed giggle. She was hearing what she had never dared to say, and it was doubly sweet to her com-

ing from Fenton. Mrs. St. Just broke in upon her enjoyment with:

"Don't refer to that, Mr. Fenton, *if—you—please*. I tore that note into a thousand pieces before the very eyes——"

"Of course you did," interrupted Fenton, "you were quite right. And the tenor of the opera who called so often that the husband——"

"Mr. Fenton, I beg you to remember——"

Fenton laughed, then:

"I *do* remember. But that was before we saw the folly of our ways and became active church members."

Mrs. St. Just was incensed. Not only was she annoyed that she had given way to her temper, but, up to this time, some of the incidents referred to by Fenton were unknown to her friend, Mrs. Houseman. She felt that in losing her self-control, she had, to a degree, sacrificed her dignity. She could no longer pose as the imperturbable woman of the world. Her wonted calm had disappeared in the riot of long forgotten memories.

To Fenton's last remark she answered with a vain attempt at her former studied composure, but there was a sting both in voice and words.

"And now, Mr. Fenton, it's so good of you to interest yourself in this unfortunate affair of the organist."

"So good of you," chimed in Mrs. Houseman with a sweet smile. While she keenly relished

the discomfiture of her friend, she was ready to join forces with her. Mrs. St. Just's allusion to Hester, gave her the key note of what was to come, and she entered into the spirit of retaliation that her companion evinced, with a zest worthy of a better, if not a more womanly cause.

Fenton looked sharply at one and then the other of the ladies. He knew the spirit that prompted their allusions to Hester; still his self-confidence did not waver. He had known them many years; and he felt assured of their assistance, if not of their sympathy.

"Have you known her long?" asked Mrs. St. Just.

"Since the unfortunate affair with Featherly," he answered.

"Quite natural that you should take an interest in her spiritual welfare," said Mrs. St. Just languidly.

"Quite," echoed Mrs. Houseman.

"A Christian interest only," Fenton replied assuringly.

"A beautiful example of true moral philanthropy, which we shall try to emulate," said Mrs. St. Just.

"Ladies," Fenton's voice was conciliatory, "I could not forbear acquainting you with her true life. Your noble example will——"

"Ah, you exaggerate!" they raised their daintily gloved hands in expostulation, "yet we hope to redeem her."

"Well I know I can trust you for old time sake," rejoined Fenton. He emphasized the last three words, and the look he bestowed on his hearers was eloquent in its self-assurance.

"Please do not refer to that period when we did not take life so seriously as we do now," Mrs. Houseman ventured.

"Em, yes," there was a touch of sarcasm in his tone, "we all reach that serious point in time. With the ladies, it begins when their dance order is not filled. Then their mirror—the hateful mirror—shows the first wrinkle. Tears! Heart-aches! And then—the consoling influence of religion. Ah——"

"Hush!" Mrs. St. Just said softly, "the services are finished."

The Rev. Dr. Dean entered by the side door, and, approaching Fenton, held out his hand.

"My dear Mr. Fenton, I trust you are mistaken in this matter of the organist."

"Unfortunately, I am not," replied Fenton.

"I cannot," replied the minister, "bring myself to believe anything but good of Miss Blair. In my years of labor I have met many people, and have mingled with all classes; seldom have I been mistaken, and never have I encountered in any walk of life, one in whom I have more confidence than in the lady in question.

"My dear Dr. Dean," answered Mrs. St. Just, "you are guided in this matter by your heart and not by your reason. We all feel keenly for Miss

Blair; but Mr. Fenton's knowledge of her past life, and the evidence in his possession that she still lives improperly, leaves us no other alternative than to dispense with her services."

"It pains me to hear of your decision," replied the minister. "As you have entire control of the matter, you will, I trust, nay I beg of you, give her a hearing."

"Most certainly," replied Mrs. St. Just.

Mrs. Houseman did not enter into the discussion. She viewed the proceeding with ill-concealed disapproval. Under her artificial, worldly coating, she was good at heart; and she did not enter into Fenton's new found moral intensity with any degree of warmth. Moreover, she knew Fenton, and she mistrusted his motives. She was, in a sense, under the domination of Mrs. St. Just, and this, with the fear of Fenton, silenced the promptings of her naturally honest, sympathetic nature, and she remained silent.

The Rev. Dr. Dean turned to Fenton, "You have evidence?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Fenton, "I not only know of her improper life with the late Mr. Featherly, but that she receives her former lover, whom she threw over to live with Mr. Featherly. You can question her, she cannot deny it."

The congregation had departed. The organ playing had ceased. Mrs. St. Just turned to the minister, "Come," she said, "we will speak to her as she comes down."

The minister motioned them toward the door through which he had entered. It opened into the church under the gallery opposite the organ loft.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE CHURCH. "I AM THE COUNTRY LOVER."

Fair Justice paused and shuddering turned away.

"I travel by circuitous route," she quoth:

"God's vengeance waits, nor grows less by delay."

Fate smiling said: "I'll answer for us both."

HESTER slowly descended the stairs. A dim flame burned in the large chandelier; the huge pillars cast ghost-like shadows; and the subdued light added an air of solemn grandeur to the deserted church. Hester did not see the minister and his companions, for the gallery hid them from view. As she was about to turn up the center aisle, they walked into the light.

"Miss Blair," said Mrs. St. Just in a tone that was devoid of feeling, "representing the committee who are entrusted with the duty of providing music for the church, I am compelled to say that we shall no longer require your services."

The suddenness of the announcement delivered in this abrupt manner was a shock to Hester, and she stood motionless for some moments unable to reply. As she did not answer Mrs. St. Just continued:

"Information has reached us that your character——"

The words aroused Hester and she echoed, "My character!"

"Is such, I grieve to say, as to warrant the church in dispensing with your services."

"My character! Information!" repeated Hester.

"Yes," answered Mrs. St. Just coldly, "evidence has been given us that is conclusive. It is better that your engagement as organist terminate without going into——"

The full force of this statement struck home to Hester with telling effect. Realizing the full meaning of the charge, with flashing eyes, holding herself erect, she stepped forward a few paces. Her voice, although not pitched above the ordinary key, rang through the church in tones of bell-like clearness.

"Do you think me so utterly lost to what is due my self-respect that I will calmly submit to this injustice? Do you expect me to surrender my good name without demanding the evidence of which you speak: of being brought face to face with my accuser? This is my right, and I demand it as my right."

The beauty of her face and figure stood out in dim relief against the background of towering pillars and rows of pews, that were lost in darkness at the far end of the church. She stood before her accusers proudly erect, with nothing in her bearing to indicate that she was the accused. They were impressed by her calm, dignified man-

ner; and the truth carrying tones of her voice disconcerted them.

The ladies, at least, had expected tears, entreaties, and petition for clemency; and Hester's bearing and the confident ring in her voice, was as disappointing as it was unexpected.

The Rev. Dr. Dean regarded Hester with the same courteous, respectful interest that he had always shown her. He did not for an instant doubt her; but he also realized that it was not for him to interfere.

Hester felt that she still retained the confidence of the pastor, and after waiting a moment for Mrs. St. Just to reply, she turned to him.

"Am I to understand, sir," she asked, "that my dismissal meets with your approval?"

"It does not," he quietly answered.

"Then," said Hester, "it is to the committee I must look for vindication, or the proof that they claim to possess."

Mrs. St. Just, after the minister's assurance, realized that she was losing ground. She was not prepared to meet the minister's moral support which he extended to Hester; and she well knew that she could expect but little help from Mrs. Houseman, whose executive ability was in keeping with her weak, vacillating nature.

Fenton had remained in the shadow of the gallery. It was his desire to procure Hester's discharge without his personal interference. He



“ It is a lie ! ”



waited with some degree of temerity for Mrs. St. Just to reply.

She cast a withering look at Hester. She was conscious that Hester's tone and manner were far more convincing than the impression she had so far been able to make, at least, on one of her listeners—the Rev. Dr. Dean. The slight interest she felt in the truth or falsity of the charge, was over-shadowed by her chagrin at being out-matched. In a cold, cutting voice, she addressed Hester.

“I wished to spare you. Know then, that we are acquainted with your past relations with the late Mr. Featherly——”

A cry of agony escaped Hester. She staggered back a few paces and grasped the railing of the gallery stairs for support. Her weakness was but momentary. Her voice rang through the church as she answered:

“It is a lie!”

Mrs. St. Just glanced at her with pitying scorn, and throwing up her gloved hands in a despairing gesture, turned to Mrs. Houseman.

“We had hoped for contrition——”

“You had hoped for contrition?” demanded Hester. “For what? I have done no wrong. Would you have me acknowledge guilt where none exists?”

Hester had regained her self composure, and stood before them calm and self-contained. The

pallor of her face was intensified by the dim light, but no other outward sign betrayed her feelings. She took a step toward the ladies.

"Consider madam, you convict me unheard. You have asked me for no explanation; you have given me no opportunity to make one. Does not the faith that you profess, prompt you to exercise the Christian principles that you are taught?" Turning to the Rev. Dr. Dean, she asked him: "Am I to be condemned unheard?"

"No," he answered firmly, "not with my consent."

"My dear sir," began Mrs. St. Just, addressing the minister, "you are too lenient by far." She turned almost fiercely on Hester.

"You will not deny that you lived with Mr. Featherly?"

"I deny nothing," answered Hester coldly.

"Would you have us believe——"

"Believe what you will——"

"And you will not answer?" demanded Mrs. St. Just.

"No," came the reply in a tone that reverberated through the church, and was lost in the organ loft above in a faint echo.

Mrs. St. Just was for the second time forgetting her mask of calmness. Her voice was raised to a shrill pitch, and with savage intensity she asked:

"You were not his wife?"

"I will not answer," came the calm reply.

"Then," replied Mrs. St. Just in passionate tones, "the charge is true."

"My child," spoke the minister, there was a tone of tenderness in his voice, "at least say your relations with Mr. Featherly were without sin."

The answer came slowly and solemnly, each word distinct, and uttered in clear, musical tones, devoid of passion, that carried conviction to the heart of the questioner.

"Before God, I swear it!"

Her voice died in a musical cadence that re-echoed through the vast edifice.

"I believe you," said the minister quietly.

"Sir!" exclaimed Mrs. St. Just excitedly, "you are being imposed upon. She is incorrigible!"

Fenton was beginning to be alarmed. He noted the effect of Hester's denial upon the minister, and realized that in him she had a strong ally and staunch friend. Of the loss of her position he felt assured, but this alone would not satisfy him, nor further, in any marked degree, his plans. He was determined that she should be disgraced, driven forth with the brand of shame upon her that would preclude the possibility of her obtaining another position. He must drag her down, humble her, and destroy any future hope of her pursuing her profession as a means of livelihood. With these thoughts in his mind, he stepped from the shadow of the gallery and spoke:

"Sir, she can deceive you, but not the ladies."

"You!" cried Hester, recoiling from him. She turned to the minister and pointed at Fenton. "No need to name my accuser. He is there! Not satisfied with offering me a life of shame, he must strike at me again."

Fenton laughed sneeringly.

Hester's tone and the intensity of her feelings thrilled her listeners.

"And even here," she cried, "here under the shadow of the altar of Almighty God, here! while his teachings still echo in the stillness, with a relentlessness born of lust, and a daring fostered by the souls he has destroyed, even here, under the shadow of the cross, he dares a just Heaven that but pauses ere it deals him retribution."

"This is blasphemous," cried Mrs. St. Just.

"It is true," answered Hester in a calm tone. "Only to-day he came to my room with a proposal that no honest woman listens to but with shame."

Hester's denunciation made a marked impression on the minister. While she was hurling the charges, Fenton felt the doubt and mistrust in the minister's glance. He made an attempt to appear self-possessed; but he was conscious that his efforts were unsuccessful.

"They'll believe that," he said with a sneering smile, addressing Hester.

"Again, I say it is true!" she answered in ringing tones.

“Enough!” exclaimed Mrs. St. Just, “if the affair with the late Mr. Featherly were not sufficient to render you unfit for the position you hold, we know that you receive in your rooms—”

“The country lover!” interjected Fenton sneeringly, “he hasn’t the wealth of my late friend Featherly, but——”

He got no farther:—John Cary stood before him. John had remained after the services waiting for Hester. He had been sitting at the far end of the church, and had been a silent listener to all that had taken place. When reference had been made to his visits to Hester, unobserved, he had walked down the aisle of the church, and now stood with folded arms before the astonished group.

Dr. Dean knew John and held him in high regard. Being the only one who retained his composure, the minister turned to John:

“Mr. Cary,” he said quietly.

“I am the country lover referred to,” said John. “I wish to speak for myself.” He turned to Fenton. “But first a word with you, sir. You denied that you were at Miss Blair’s rooms to-day.”

“I did,” answered Fenton suavely.

“Where is your other glove?” demanded John, pointing to the glove which Fenton held in his hand.

“I dropped it, probably, in the parsonage as I came in,” answered Fenton.

"You know that to be false." Taking from his pocket the glove that he had found in Hester's room, he continued: "I found your glove to-day in Miss Blair's room, where you dropped it. There it is."

John threw the glove at Fenton's feet, and with folded arms, calmly faced him. Fenton was non-plussed, but his face wore the same sinister smile. The progress of events of the last hour had gone far astray from what he had planned. But, whatever might happen, Mrs. St. Just and her companion would do his bidding. His self-assurance returning, with a dry laugh he addressed Mrs. St. Just:

"This loyalty is indeed touching!" he said.

"This is neither the time nor the place to answer you as you deserve," John answered. "We will have our reckoning elsewhere." He turned to the minister and continued: "Sir, I have been rightly called the country lover, for I have loved Miss Blair since we were children together, and I shall continue to love her, until God in his goodness grants me the love of as pure a woman as ever graced the earth. I am waiting until her heart responds; and all the world might know what has passed between us. I thank you, sir, for your trust in her. Believe me, it has not been misplaced."

He took Hester's hand in his own and together they walked down the aisle and out into the starlit night. They went on in silence: the same

thoughts and feelings filling the hearts of both. It was not a time for words. Sorrow and mortification hung heavy upon them, and neither had a desire to refer to the happenings of the past hour, that had cost them their happiness and peace of mind. To Hester it seemed like a nightmare. Yet, like a beacon light shining over a sea of despair, true as the needle to the pole, was the love of the man beside her,—pure, steadfast and unchanging as the march of time.

As she thought of his unselfish love, a guilty feeling took possession of her. He gave to her his heart, his life, his very soul; and she gave him in return—what? Affectionate regard. Yet were he to go out of her life, with him would go what desire she had to live. Though unconscious of it she loved him; and as the ivy clings to the oak, so she leaned upon him and lived,—his love the one support of her being. Hers was no new-born passion that burned fiercely because of its sudden birth. It was the return for a life devotion that had been hers, and was founded on the trust and confidence that she felt for him. No one knew her better, no one respected her sterling qualities more than John. His trust in her was absolute, and through the past month, when appearances were such as to raise a doubt in the mind of one who judged her by a lower standard, his faith in her was unshaken; and her simple assurance outweighed a hundredfold the evidence that pointed to her guilt.

They reached the door of the house where Hester lodged. John took her hand in his own.

"Hester love," he said, "tell me that you will not take this too much to heart."

"I should have been prepared for it;" she replied, "I could have expected nothing else after my interview with Fenton. But, John dear," her voice was tremulous with emotion, "you cannot know the feeling of shame, of humiliation! It is not of myself that I think, but of Ethel. It cannot be kept from her for any length of time; and it is the effect on her young life that I most fear."

They entered the lower hall and John was about to leave her.

"Promise me," he said, "that if you need assistance, even advice, you will send for me."

She laughed bitterly.

"To whom else should I send, John dear?" Then with a sudden impulse she continued hurriedly: "How can your faith in me withstand what you have seen and heard? Can you still go on trusting me?" She mused a moment in deep thought. "I sometimes think that men are creatures of extremes, they either trust not at all, or their faith is carried to the very point where reason and judgment seem to forsake them, so blind it is, so unswerving, so unyielding in its loyalty. And you still believe in me, John?"

"Believe in you, little woman!" He laughed softly and for answer kissed her lightly on the

cheek. "Hester," he said, "we will not talk of belief. Think only of the future that is before us."

"The future?" she laughed sadly.

"Whatever the future has in store for you," he answered, "you will share with me. You have only to say the word that will make our lives one."

"Hush, John dear, don't speak of it yet."

With a tender goodnight he left her and walked rapidly down the street.

CHAPTER XVIII

SLACK PLANS A TRIP INTO THE WOODS FOR FENTON

What I'm now about ter say is good termorrer as terday.

Ef yer don't want folks ter know what yer about,
Listen to 'em without blinkin'; jest keep up a mighty
thinkin',

An' the chances are they'll never find it out.

NORTON was in commotion. The annual spring cleaning was under full sway. Not only were the housewives busy, but along the water front, and in the fishermen's quarters, all was bustle and noisy preparation for the coming summer season. Boats were dragged out from winter quarters; there was scraping and scrubbing; painting and overhauling of riggings; old sails, and, in some instances masts were being replaced by new and staunch material. Cheerful expectancy pervaded the village, for the fishermen looked forward to a prosperous season and were preparing to meet it,

The toilers of the sea exchanged cheerful greetings, and good-naturedly badgered each other. If these were resented, the victim of their homely pleasantries would receive a gentle reminder, that next to perpetrating a good joke, was the ability to take one; and he who would not enter into the humor of their ways, would find his work

of the past week undone. Some bright morning, the erring member of their guild would discover his fishing nets in a hopeless tangle of knots, that would require hours or days to unravel; the mast of his boat would mysteriously disappear; and paint, of colors rare and monstrous, spread with a lavish hand and with pointed disregard for symmetry or artistic effect, would bedeck the craft of the Unwise One, that was at once his pride and means of livelihood.

These little incidents enlivened the tedium of their lives, and served as events in their monotonous existence.

On a mild spring day in the latter part of April, Slack was at work on the wharf calking his small boat. A double row of empty barrels hid him from view from the land side, and only the click of his chisel could be heard. The wharf was owned by a company of which John's uncle was president, and was, during John's absence, in Slack's charge.

Captain Edwards pulled up to where Slack was at work, and rested on his oars.

"What be yer adoin,' Slacky?"

"I'm a cockin' this yer dory," answered Slack, "don't know whether I kin make her float er not. She's 'bout played out."

"Heard th' news, heven' yer?"

"Nothin' out er common," Slack replied.

"That Mr. Fenton as wer' 'ere las' summer come on th' arternoon train."

"The devil!" ejaculated Slack.

"Huh?" interrogated the captain.

"O, I wer' thinkin' it wer' early fer summer visitors," Slack replied.

"Taken Squire Bently's cottage fer th' summer."

"Hes he? Em!" Slack manifested but slight interest.

"When be Hessie comin'?" queried the captain.

"Don' know zactly, sometime this week."

"Be she goin' to stay all summer?"

"Couldn't say, mebbe."

"John's goin' ter hev a piece built on ter th' wharf. D'e tell yer?"

"Heered 'im mention it," Slack replied. He continued working.

The captain was no sooner gone, than Slack dropped his chisel and his face wore an expression of anything but unconcern. He thought long and deeply, but could arrive at no satisfactory solution of the motives of Fenton's visit.

The one fact that obtruded itself was that Fenton was in Norton.

Why he came, was beyond the grasp of the fisherman. He was satisfied that no good would follow his coming; and he could not but associate Fenton's arrival with the return of Hester. His brow was knit in deep meditation, and an ominous expression came into his eyes. He had ceased working, and did not hear the sound of ap-

proaching footsteps until a movement directly in front of where he was sitting arrested his attention. He peered through the opening in the row of barrels. Fenton, smoking a cigarette, stood not twenty feet away, looking out over the harbor. Slack's first impulse was to spring upon him, and throw him into the water; and while he was seriously considering this point, he heard footsteps coming down the wharf, and recognized the quick, swinging gait of John Cary. He looked gloatingly at the stalwart figure of his friend, and waited expectantly for him to speak. Slack knew the feelings that John entertained toward Fenton, and the fisherman grinned as he mentally measured the two men; Fenton, lithe, graceful, tall, slender and effeminate looking: every detail of his dress in faultless good taste; John, the personification of healthful, robust, manly vigor: broad shouldered, deep chested, well put together, with the carriage of the trained athlete. John had on a suit of old clothes which he always wore when at work about the wharf that were in marked contrast with the tailor made garments of Fenton.

Slack's heart went out to "his boy." He expected something to happen. He was not disappointed. John in a tone devoid of passion addressed Fenton.

"Mr. Fenton, I recognize your right as that of any man to come to Norton. I ask if your visit here has any connection with Miss Blair?"

"As you admit my right to come here, I also concede your right to ask damn impertinent questions; but I exercise my privilege of not answering them."

"Sir," answered John in an even tone, "I do not wish to quarrel with you; yet I insist on an answer, and I will have it. Do you intend to continue your persecutions of Miss Blair?"

Fenton was not a coward. He could not but see that John was his superior physically; and on this isolated wharf, if he stopped to consider at all, he must have recognized that he was entirely at the mercy of the man before him. His tone was sneeringly patronizing as he answered:

"Let me see! Since when were you commissioned to meddle in my affairs, and by whom?"

He looked John over contemptuously, a half sneer on his lips. The look was more provoking than the words, and cut John like a whip lash in the face.

Slack could see every changing expression on the countenances of the two men. The fisherman's eyes snapped with excitement; his hands clenched firmly; and, with his body thrust forward until his forehead touched the barrels, he watched the encounter between them with breathless interest. Insolent though Fenton was, Slack admired the courage of the man, whom he admitted must be without fear. He saw the blood rush to John's face and marveled at his self-

control. John answered without a trace of anger.

"I do not intend to argue the matter with you," he said, "but believe me, Miss Blair is not without friends."

"Nor," sneered Fenton, "without admirers. I plead guilty to being one of the number. I realize I'm not alone. The late Mr. Featherly out-matched us. Rather provoking considering I was his equal financially."

At this covert allusion which was not to be misunderstood, John stepped a few paces forward. His hands were clenched, his eyes blazed, and his general aspect was threatening. He seemed about to strike Fenton, and Slack made an involuntary movement that set the barrels in motion, which, however, passed unnoticed.

John controlled himself and his voice was pitched in a low key as he answered:

"Sir, there is not a man in Norton who would not, if need be, defend Miss Blair. What I say to you is not meant as a threat, but it will be well for you to cease your persecution of her."

"And leave the field to you, eh?" Fenton replied with a laugh. "Young man, when you are older you will realize that it takes money——"

He got no further. With a spring John grasped him by the throat, and shook him until the veins in Fenton's forehead stood out like whipcords.

Slack, in his excitement, had jumped to his feet,

and his head appeared above the row of barrels. His eyes danced, and he grinned as he saw Fenton's distorted face.

John flung Fenton violently from him. The head behind the barrels disappeared; and Fenton, with an effort to regain his self-composure, pulled himself together.

"Let that be a reminder," said John, "to think twice before you again refer to the lady in question."

John turned quickly and walked down the wharf, followed by a sneering laugh.

"Eh Gad!" muttered Fenton, "but I rather admire the fellow. He has a grip of steel and Herculean strength. Ha! but he did pinch!" He rubbed his throat and neck with his hand, then continued: "Brute force may win battles, but in modern warfare strategy has displaced it. You will find, young man, that an ounce of finesse, is worth a pound of flesh,—even of the muscular-developed article. If you had trained your mind as you have your muscle, your progress in love making might meet with quicker return."

He took a telegram from his pocket and read it. A smile played about the corners of his mouth. He looked in the direction that John had taken and spoke softly:

"You don't know that the fair Hester is coming on to-night's train—a day ahead of time. So much for having a confidential agent in New York."

He looked at the telegram which he held and read aloud: "Left on the Boston express. If through connections will arrive at Norton at 8:30 p. m.," he continued after a pause, "and I am the only one that knows of her coming; and I shall be the first to greet her at the station."

He lighted a cigarette and walked slowly down the wharf toward the village.

Slack's fuzzy head again appeared above the top of the barrels. He then seated himself on the edge of the dory, and with a chisel in one hand, and a stick of wood in the other, thought long and deeply. He was busy cutting a notch in the stick and whistled softly, his usual custom when worried. He spoke, puncturing each sentence with a notch in the stick.

"So yer the only one thet knows as Hessie's comin' air yer? He, he, he. When yer air older young man, yer'll hev more of what yer call fineness, and read yer telegrams ter yerself. Yer ought to know 'fore this time thet boats hev ears, an' barrels hev ears, an'"—he jabbed the chisel into the wood—"yer dern fool, ef yer breathe in the State of Maine, someone in Vermont's sure ter hear yer."

The third notch was well under way. Slack held the stick up and examined his work, shaving a little from one side and smoothing the other, inspecting it meanwhile with a critical eye. "An'," he continued, "yer'll be the only one to meet her at the depot ter-night; well, mebbe yer

will, an' then agin, mebbe yer won't. The dum thing ain't even," he growled, as he examined the results of his efforts with the chisel. After a close scrutiny of the stick, he continued: "It 'pears ter me that *I* might be considered in this ere 'rangement. First of all, Mr. Fenton, you *won't* be the only one to meet Hessie at the depot, thet's 'lowing thet yer git there."

He rounded off another notch, then: "An' it's exceedin' doubtful ef yer reach th' depot at all, thet is, ter-night. An' 'less my calkerlations go th' way uv Jim Robinson's chickens, when they disappeared 'tween sunset and sunrise, 'cause Jim wouldn't shet em up, an' stop 'em from scratchin' up th' neighbors' gardens——"

He paused in his work and chuckled. "Gosh!" he addressed the stick he held in his hand, "I eat some of them chickens myself. I guess most everyone hed chicken soup th' next day, an' cold chicken every day for a week: thet is, everyone 'cept Jim Robinson!—Well, as I was sayin' Mr. Fenton, yer've got to be given th' same hint as we give Jim, an' thet is, thet th' majority rules in this yer hamlet of ourn."

He regarded his efforts at whittling with disapproval, "dern the thing!" he grumbled, throwing the stick into the water, "I can't whittle straight and think too."

He leaned against the row of barrels and thought long and deeply. The constantly changing expression of his features betrayed his emo-

tions. There was an expression on his face that those who knew him disliked to see. His mouth was firmly set, and, as he stood with one hand grasping the edge of a barrel, and the other holding the chisel, bareheaded, his form erect and straight as an arrow, and with a look of set determination on his face, he looked what he was—a picture of sturdy and self-reliant manhood.

“John an’ Fenton hev hed trouble in New York. Thet’s certain,” he mused, “an’ John knows he’s chasin’ o’ Hessie.” He paused, then in a tone of firm conviction:

“Ef he knew John Cary es well es I do, he’d rather buck up agin a wild Injun ’n tackle ’im. Ef *he* gets arter ’im in downright earnest—well, Bud Hennessey kin tell ’im all about it. Bud said he could down any man in the county. He *would* lick his wife an’ he *wouldn’t* listen ter John when John told ’im not ter lick her agin, or he’d hev ter settle. Well, Bud licked her agin thet same night, an’ then—ho, ho, ho—” roared Slack, “an’ *then* he settled with John. Yer bet he did! But warn’t Bud a sight! And John didn’t let up till Bud promised never ter lift a finger to her agin, an’ he never hes. Yes, Mr. Fenton, Bud’ll tell yer all about it. Ter start with, yer not goin’ ter meet Hessie ter-night! But I can’t think it out here. I’ll go outside fer a sail an’ th’ wind’ll blow th’ cobwebs out er my brain; an’ fore night, I’ll hev a little trip arranged fer yer, Mr. Fenton, er my name’s not Slack Dorkins.”

CHAPTER XIX

FENTON'S PLANS MISCARRY

A boat drifts out to open sea,
The patient helmsman sits astern,
Anon, he laughs right merrily,
Though fires of wrath within him burn.
"Though I'm not much on books," quoth he,
"I do know jest a thing or two;
What most consarns us—you an' me,
'S jest how ter 'range a trip fer you."
The lapping waves laughed with disdain.
He paused, and silence reigned again.

ON the still waters of the bay, a small boat, catrigged, steals softly out of the harbor of Norton. There is scarcely wind enough to fill the sail, that flaps petulantly for want of motive power. The tide has turned and is running out, lending some assistance to the impatient Slack, who, sitting astern, answers the gibes and sarcasms of his fisherman friends and rivals. The dullest of them are surprised and inquisitively anxious, regarding the cause of his departure at this unusual hour. If he were not alone, there would have been no cause for comment; but at this time of day and without what they termed a "freight,"—they were quick to come to the conclusion that something unusual was taking place—or had Slack one of his spells?

He passed within hailing distance of Seth Binks' boat. The industrious Binks ceased scrubbing the deck of his schooner to hail him.

"Where in thunder be yer goin' at this time er day?"

"Nowhere in 'ticular," drawled Slack, "jest takin' a sail."

"Yer ain't in the habit er goin' outside to take a sail alone! What's struck yer?"

"O nothin' much, jest er killin' time."

"D'yer know Mr. Fenton's here fer th' summer?"

"Is he?" was the noncommittal reply.

"Yes, thet's his yacht yonder. She's anchored near Bill Blake's schooner. See her?"

"Yes, I see 'er."

"Mr. Fenton's goin' outside with 'er ter-morrer."

"How'd you know?"

"Skipper tole me."

"Mebbe he be," was Slack's retort in an undertone. His caution was, however, unnecessary:—the boats were out of speaking distance.

It was too confined in the bay, and Slack steered for the open water. As he passed the light-house point, the boat answered to the fresh breeze outside, the cool air tossed his hair into wild disorder, cleared the fog from his brain, and the happenings of the past few hours began to arrange themselves with systematic clearness. He struck the knuckles of his bony hand against

his forehead to get his ideas into working trim. The water lapping the sides of the boat soothed him, and his habitual expression of good-nature returned. Now and then a wave of larger dimensions would splash complainingly against the boat, interrupting his thoughts for the moment; then his smile would broaden to a grin, as some new aspect of the situation presented itself. He was a mile or more from the nearest land. The ocean swell lifted the little craft buoyantly on its crest, toyed with it, and playfully passed it down to the miniature green-blue vale, there to meet and surmount the next oncoming wave.

“Now, Mr. Fenton,” spoke Slack in a positive tone, “this much is settled: yer’ve met John in New York, an’ yer’ve ben up ter some diveltry. That’s as plain as the wart on Capt. Edwards’ nose. An’ yer come here again to see Hessie, an’ thet’s as clear—clear as light through a jellyfish. Yer come with yer fine yacht, an’ by the looks of er she do lay over anything on this yer coast. Well, everything’s O. K. till yer get here. Then what? Why, yer walks down ter the wharf big es life, an’ who’s the fust yer run inter? Why John, o’course. Then the fun commences. John sez, ‘Mr. Fenton, I don’t care whether yer come to Norton or whether yer don’t come to Norton; yer kin do as yer dern please about it,’ er words to thet effect. ‘But ef yer come down ’ere, yer ter let Hessie ’lone.’ Thet’s what he meant, though mebbe he didn’t say it in them same

words. Fenton says something about answering damn impertinent questions, then John sez, 'remember what I tell yer: Hessie's got all the friends she wants,' and *thet's* where John hed it right. Then the dern skunk said somethin' 'bout money, an' *thet's* where John grabbed 'im by th' throat an' shook the dern life out o' 'im. Gosh! don' believe I could er done it better m'self. Then he jest fired Fenton agin the barrels, same's he were a bundle er rags, and walks off as though 'e wer' King o' th' Cannibal Islands, an' first cousin ter the Governor. Gum! I jest wished John hed passed him over ter me. I heven't hed any practice to speak of since I parted with the feller on the Bowery as knowed me 'Down East,' an' wanted ter show me the sights."

"Now, *thet* dern fool shud hev knowed I sized 'im the minute I set eyes on 'im. He wanted ter show me th' sights, an' I let 'im do th' showin'; but when he wanted ter drink, he drank alone. *Thet* was one er th' nights *thet* I wer' drinkin' nothin'. An' then—ho, ho, ho—he got er little fresh, an' I took 'im in hand—jest as though he'd never knowed me 'Down East.' But he put up a good fight, *thet* I'll allow; an' I was a dustin' an alley way with 'im, when a policeman came along an' grabbed us both. He, he, he—wan' he a sight! Huh! yer can't kill *thet* kind. But ef Millie ever finds it out!"—He shuddered. Then with a rueful nod of his head: "It'll be all up with me, an' no mistake on *thet* point.

Here I am"—he addressed a sea gull that sailed majestically by—"rambling 'way like an ole woman, an' with what hes no more to do with what I come out here fer, than nothin' 'tall. Let's see! Where wer' yer Slacky? O yes! Then Mr. Fenton lights a cigarette and says, he'd be damned ef he didn't admire John. An' thet's where I 'greed with Fenton. Now the whole thing is here in a nutshell: John sez he don't want yer 'round botherin' Hessie; an' what John sez goes in this yer village, an' hereabouts. Mr. Fenton, yer've got ter learn, an' we've got our own way of teachin' yer; an' th' sooner yer take yer medsin the better."

An expression, beatific in its sublime confidence, overspread the features of the fisherman. With philosophical wisdom he spoke: "Slack, in the language of the books, yer've 'riv' at a conclusion."

Long he paused. His scheme, which was revolving in his brain, was mirrored in his eyes. The constantly changing expression of his face told the difficulties he was mentally encountering. Then his features would relax into a broad grin, and an audible chuckle break the stillness. His voice again interrupted the splash of the water.

"Yer've got ter learn a lesson, Mr. Fenton, an' one thet you'll remember. Yer can't come down here with yer New York way of doing things, 'specially when it's a cussed mean way.

Yer *not* goin' ter meet Hessie ter-night. Thet's settled. An' I *think* we'll give yer a little trip up country or down th' coast. Yer ken take yer choice of goin' twenty miles inter th' woods 'n stoppin' er day or two at Col. Demmock's huntin' camp, or takin' a trip in Bill Blake's schooner. Ef yer go ter the camp, yer'll hev ter ride twenty miles over a mighty rough road ter-night, an' th' feed you'll get there ain't fattenin'. Ef yer go in Bill's schooner, yer'll hev a good 'nough cabin, an' be set down on the coast when yer've repented in a Christian-like fashion, an' hed time ter see th' folly ef yer ways. Now ter save yer th' trouble of choosin', I'll do it for yer. Here comes a whitecap. Ef th' boat ships any water ter the camp yer go; ef she don't, yer'll go sailin' with Bill Blake, an' *not* in yer own yacht, though I'll 'low she'd be more on comfort; an' besides, Bill's got the divil's own temper. Steady with the rudder Slacky, we'll do the fair thing."

On came the whitecap. The boat met it with a biff of the prow. It mounted and rode the crest with swan-like ease, and the spray flew into the face of the silent helmsman.

"Putty close," he muttered, "but I guess Mr. Fenton yer'll go to the camp. By gum! thet's settled. I feel better a'ready. Now I've decided what ter do, we'll see what's the best way ter do it. Ther'll be time 'nough ter figure on where the thing'll land me. Fust, we've got ter hev a

team. Fenton sez he's goin' ter the 8:30 train ter meet Hessie. He, he, he," chuckled the resourceful Slack, "Mebbe he be. The chances are he'll go 'lone. Ef there's no one with him, it's as clear sailin' as runnin' this yer boat. Ef he ben't alone—well, I reckon I kin git all the help I need."

He mused awhile and a serious expression overspread his features. Another aspect of the undertaking had presented itself.

"Now," he continued, "they don't kidnap a man in this yer State 'thout a fuss bein' made. Wall, ef it gets too hot, I'll go ter Jedge Bixby and make a clean breast on't. I kin remember when the Jedge didn't hev a cent;—when Hessie's father picked him up. He wer' poorer than I ever wer'. Mr. Blair sent him ter school; tuck him inter his office ter study th' law; made a man of him, an' a jedge ef 'im. I don't think Jedge Bixby'd be very hard on anyone tryin' ter save the daughter of Henry Blair from a dum rascal. Anyhow, Slack Dorkins, we'll take the chances. We'd do more'n thet for John an' th' gals, more'n thet."

Bringing the boat up to the wind, the sail filled, and the slender mast bent to the work. He hummed snatches of songs, that had often made the nets haul easier, and the long stretches of dreary weather and still drearier sea, seem brighter and more companionable.

As he entered the harbor on his return he was

met with a storm of jeering remarks and good-natured raillery.

"Oh, ho, some folks must hev it bad when they'd go sailin' 'lone—Millie ain't refused yer agin, hes she—he's ben outside ter fix the weddin' day!"

No answer from the boat being steered by a master-hand through the tangle of small craft. Slack ran up alongside Bill Blake's schooner rigged yacht and made fast.

"Ho, Bill!" he bellowed, "come up on deck, I want ter see yer."

Bill heard the voice booming along the companion way, and answered with an alacrity uncommon among fishermen. It was enough for Slack to call, for Bill to respond without question; and he looked the gratitude and admiration that he was forbidden to utter. Bill had not forgotten:—which went to prove that he was unmindful of the ways of the world.

"How do, Slacky, I saw yer go out. Won't yer come aboard? Got a little old stuff down in the cabin, some I got from Bost'n."

"No thank yer, can't stop. Jump inter my boat. I've got somethin' to say ter yer."

Bill lowered himself into the boat. The heads of the two men were close together and only scraps of their conversation were audible.

"Yes, I'll do it," said Bill in a mysterious tone. "Double team; that drygoods wagon of Simpson's would be a good one. Seth'll give me all

the help I want, 'n you keep out er th' way. Yes, you tend to Hessie; I'll take care of Mr. Fenton—they'll never suspect me—O'course ther's some risk—O, never min' me, I'll take keer o' myself—You keep out er sight. You know you can count on me. I'll take keer ev 'im. He kin spend the night in the camp, an' in the morning he kin walk eight miles ter the nearest house. Dern 'im, it'll be good exercise fer 'im. Good-by Slacky."

A push from the black hull of the boat, a turn of the rudder, and the boat glided to her anchorage. Slack quietly entered the cabin of his schooner, and the fumes of an old black pipe filled the little craft, also it filled the heart of the silent smoker with wondrous content.

Bill Blake was quietly busy. Mysterious preparations were being made by him, but there was no noise, bustle or excitement to be noticed in his appearance or movements.

If one were interested, he might have discovered in an old barn, half way between the village and the railway station, a pair of horses hitched to an old fashioned close vehicle, that was formerly the property of a drygoods peddler.

Some hours before the north bound train was due, Bill and Portuguese Joe were seated in the barn, and through the partly closed door scrutinized each passerby. They were a goodly pair, muscular and determined. To Bill Blake, death

would be preferable to failure. He naively asserted: "Thet Slacky hed a mortgage on his life; the int'rest was long overdue, an' he'd like ter pay off some er the principal."

Patiently they waited. The dusk of evening was merging into night. A whip-o-will sent out a note of warning; a night owl hooted irrelevantly; and a soft breeze set the tall pines that bordered each side of the road to sobbing fitfully.

Fenton walked leisurely and unheedingly on his way to the station. The barn door squeaked on its rusty hinges, and the team was slowly driven after the solitary pedestrian.

At a turn in the road where the branches of the trees met, the horses came to an abrupt halt, and the two men sprang to the ground. A short, sharp, decisive struggle followed, and Fenton lay on his back in the wagon, bound hand and foot. A towel was tied over his face, and with stifled oaths and imprecations from their victim, the men whipped up their horses and, with maddening speed, turned sharply into the seldom frequented road, and were lost in the wooded waste.

The north bound train rumbled into Norton thirty minutes late.

Hester alighted and looked about her for the driver of the public carriage. Almost immediately, Slack, cap in hand, making his best courtesy, stood before her.

"Why, Miss Hessie, this *be* a surprise. Hed no idea yer wer' comin' ter-night. Lucky I came down. My rig's here. I'll take yer home."

Hester greeted him warmly.

"Thank you, Slack, I'm so glad you are here. It is, indeed, fortunate that you came."

Her smile of thanks repaid her listener a thousand-fold for the risk he was running in her behalf; and his heart thumped with joy at seeing her again. He took her small hand-grip and led the way to "his rig." He muttered: "Gosh! I'm learnin' ter lie 'most as good as Jed Dudley." Then aloud: "Quite an accident my bein' here, Miss Hessie, quite 'n accident. Hedn' any ide' yer wer' comin' 'fore ter-morrer."

They entered the carriage and drove rapidly away, and the stars blinked down their forgiveness and benediction on the erring Slack.

CHAPTER XX

HESTER'S HOMECOMING

"The same old home, the same old friends and yet—
Would that I could forget!"

AS they sped homeward, Slack kept up a constant chatter. The astute fisherman divined what was passing in his companion's mind. He felt that her homecoming brought vividly before her the trouble she had passed through, in sad contrast with the happy, peaceful hours of girlhood. He further surmised that, with her regret, there was mingled a dread of meeting the prying, inquisitive friends of former years. He knew that her return would be a topic of gossip in the village for days to come, and his mouth was firmly set as he thought of the vicious speculation that her homecoming would occasion.

He did not, however, give her time to dwell on the false position in which she placed herself, and rattled on, from the latest village news, to Millie's joy at seeing her again.

Hester understood, and smiled affectionately at his almost childlike attempt to appear natural and unconcerned. Her heart went out to him, and tears glistened in her eyes as she thought of his loyalty and perfect trust in her.

Millie met them at the door and folded Hester in her arms, while the tears streamed down her withered cheeks. She did not attempt to speak,—she could not; but led Hester into the well-lighted dining room and, holding her close, looked at her through her tears.

“Yer ain’t changed much, Hessie dear,” she said when she could control her voice, “but yer be a little thin.”

She scanned Hester’s features closely, and the reassuring smile she received in return did not wholly suffice to allay her fears. “Are you quite well, Hessie dear?” she asked.

“Quite,” answered Hester, “only I need a little rest after the long journey. Now tell me, Millie dear, how you have been?”

“O, I were so lonesome,” answered the warm hearted spinster, and the tears gushed forth again as evidence of the truth of her assertion. Recovering her composure, the sight of the well-filled table reminded her of Hester’s needs. “Hessie, yer be hungry, ben’t yer, dear?”

Hester well knew that, to gladden Millie’s heart, she must eat, which she accordingly did, with a relish. This was the highest compliment she could pay to the tender hearted spinster, who hung over her and helped her to the little delicacies that she had prepared. With gentle, loving touches Millie arranged the collar of Hester’s dress, replaced a lock of hair that had become loosened, patting her head, meanwhile, with

nervous little touches, which brought back her motherly smile; and before the meal was finished their former peaceful existence had been resumed, where it had been interrupted by Hester's departure for New York.

Millie's face beamed with the joy that filled her, and a sense of peace filled Hester's heart with a warmth, new and strange. For the first time in months a feeling of security, that the atmosphere of her old home awakened, stole over her; and the feeling of dread of her homecoming that had filled her heart, gave place to a delicious sensation of ease and peaceful content.

Millie seated herself at the table with her eyes fixed on the beautiful face before her. Hester's cheeks were diffused with a soft color, and her eyes shone with a brilliancy which reflected her happiness. Her beauty had never attracted Millie as it did now. The light from a shaded lamp threw a soft, mellow glow upon Hester's features; and the gloating eyes of the spinster took in every line of the exquisitely moulded face before her. Her eyes told what her tongue could not say, and she nodded her head with conscious satisfaction not unmingled with pride.

"Hessie," she said, "yer don't know how glad I am ter hev yer at hum agin."

"Yes I do, Millie dear," laughed Hester, "for I judge your feelings by my own delight at being here."

"An' I'm so glad yer've come, an' ken tell every-

one how well yer've done. Slack's only tole half ef it—where be the pesky critter?" she exclaimed, looking around the room,—“ef he ain't gone agin! Do you believe it, Hessie dear, I can't keep track ef that man, more'n I can keep track o' the wind on a March day. Since he got hum from New York I kin do nothin' with 'im at all. It wer' days arter he got back afore I could wring anything out er him 'cept: 'Hessie be a doin' fust rate, an' she's well,' same's I didn't know thet afore he went ther'.”

Hester smiled encouragingly. Millie wiped her spectacles on the corner of her apron and continued:

“He sez thet every night he wer' in New York, he tended the Salvation Army meetings.” Millie paused expectantly. That she was not wholly convinced that such was a fact, was apparent. Hester ventured nothing to the contrary, but the suspicion of a smile played about the corners of her mouth. Before it could be noticed by her companion, it was followed by an expression of calm interest. Millie continued:

“Yer don't know how I fretted 'bout 'im when he wer' away. Yer know, Hessie dear, he's no more fit ter take keer o' himself, than a three-year-old child.”

This was too much for Hester's self-control, and she laughed softly as she thought of Slack's encounter with the coachman; and various little

tales of his exploits that Featherly never tired of reciting.

"I don't wonder yer laugh," said Millie in a resigned tone, "fer yer know as well as I do thet he's not fit ter go ter thet awful city, leastwise, 'thout someone ter look out fer 'im."

Hester nodded, and Millie continued:

"I ast 'im ef he went inside o' one o' them horrid theatres, an' he said, 'Millie, yer know I wouldn't tell yer a lie,' an' I know he wouldn't," asserted Millie with a positive shake of her head, "or 'twould be the last one he'd ever tell me. Well, when I ast 'im ef he'd been ter one o' them wicked places, he jest looked at me, an' sez, 'Millie, I'd as soon go ter one o' them theatres as ter fight,' an' I know he never fit anyone in his life. He said thet Mr. Featherly treated 'im real kind, an' the servants wer' jest like hum people. Why he said he felt real sorry at partin' from the coachman, an' ef he knowed where ter send 'im word, he'd write 'im ter come ter Norton ter stay a spell."

At that moment the subject of Millie's remarks entered the room.

Hester smiled as she looked at the muscular, shambling form of the fisherman. Millie's scornful glance was met with one of calm concern.

"Now where've yer bin?" asked Millie testily.

"Puttin' up th' hoss," Slack quietly answered.

"Take yer all this time?"

"No," came the laconic reply.

"What yer ben doin'?"

A knock at the door, followed by John's entrance, interrupted Slack's answer. Hester greeted John warmly.

"We didn't expect you until to-morrow," he said.

"It was my intention to come to-morrow, but I was anxious to get home; besides there was no necessity for remaining longer in New York.

"If I had known of your coming, I would have been at the station to meet you."

"Slack was there."

"Yes, so he told me," answered John.

"So thet's where yer've bin sense yer got back from th' depot," said Millie in a mollified tone.

"How did it happen that you went to the station, Slack?" asked John.

"Gosh! I don' know," answered Slack, "jest ter kill time, I reckon. Never wer' so surprised as when I see Hessie get off the train."

The talk drifted to village affairs. Both men refrained from mentioning Fenton's name. John did not wish to cause Hester the annoyance that the knowledge of Fenton's arrival would occasion; and Slack, for reasons of his own, appeared to be wholly unconscious of it. Regarding what had become of Fenton, the wily fisherman had no intention of taking John into his confidence. John would be the first to be suspected by Fenton, and Slack was determined that John

should know nothing of the affair, and be able to face Fenton's accusation with a clear conscience.

Hester and John went into the adjoining room, and sitting beside the fire, that burned cheerily in the open grate, conversed in low tones. They were not entirely at ease in the presence of Millie and Slack, and their attempt to appear natural, was not wholly successful. The fisherman observed their embarrassment, but by neither word nor action did he betray that he saw it. He went about the house in his accustomed way, devoting his time to Millie, and receiving her rebuffs in his usual placid, good-natured manner.

Hester and John kept up a desultory attempt at conversation. They avoided all reference to New York; each feeling a gloomy repugnance to call up memories that brought vividly before them what they had gone through. For the same reason, John refrained from referring to the future, which offered to Hester humiliation that she would feel even more keenly than that to which she had already been subjected. He realized that she must meet the townspeople daily. These he divided into two classes;—one class that would openly slight her, the other—through mistaken zeal—force upon her an oppressive, patronizing friendliness that would be prompted by pity. The latter would, he well knew, cause Hester the most annoyance. She could hold her-

self aloof from those who would make no attempt to disguise their feelings toward her—her pride would sustain her; but she would be defenceless when confronted with a pity that implied guilt.

There are troubles that friends or lovers cannot speak of freely, that seem beyond mending, and are hopeless; and they both felt that words would only add to their discomfiture, and were best left unsaid.

It was John's desire that she should lose no time in being seen in the village. He argued—and with reason—that the sooner the ordeal was over, the better. Though but a few hours since Fenton's arrival, John feared that he had already made known the events that had taken place the night of Featherly's death. He had heard whispered comments in the village that left no doubt in his mind that Fenton's purpose in coming to Norton was to continue his persecution of Hester, and ruin her in the eyes of the townspeople. After a desultory attempt at conversation, John asked:

"You will go to church to-morrow, Hester?"

"I had quite forgotten the day of the week," she answered. "I would dearly love to go, but I dread it."

"Nonsense," he replied, "I shall call for you at ten o'clock. Of course Millie and Slack will go. We will go together."

Hester smiled. She understood his purpose,

but did not reply. It was as well, she thought, to have it over. It was perhaps better that she should accustom herself to the changed relations between the townspeople and herself. Surely the friends that had known her from childhood, that had known her father, would not believe ill of her; and the consciousness that she was innocent of wrong-doing, gave her new courage. With an attempt at cheerfulness she said:

"John dear, I blame myself for giving way in this almost childish manner, and taking such a gloomy view of life, when there is so much suffering in the world—actual, physical suffering. One cannot change the conditions, but each of us can do his share to relieve and better them. We magnify our own trouble a thousand-fold, and come to believe that ours is the greatest burden to bear. I never realized until the last few months that Heaven had given me much to be thankful for—the love of friends that is a world of happiness in itself."

John's big, brown hand patted hers lovingly. He did not speak; and the fire shot forth little tongues of flame, that danced merrily to the music of crackling logs, sending a riotous flood of shadows over the walls and ceiling. Millie's voice came through the open door.

"Yer needn't tell me," she was saying, "what yer got ter do ter-morrer;—yer goin' ter church. The work'll wait. Enyone's religious as you wer' in New York, wants ter practise it ter hum."

"Yes, that's so," Slack replied dubiously, "but yer see, I lived up to it ther' so well, I kinder thought 'twould do fer th' hull year. Ther's such a thing, Millie, es bein' too religious. Now Deacon Prouty sez——"

"No matter what Deacon Prouty sez," came the uncomforting reply. "Yer'll go ter church ter-morrer mornin'." As the decision admitted of no appeal, silence followed.

"Dear Millie!" Hester's voice was tenderly soft. After a pause she smiled and continued: "What would she say to some of Slack's doings in New York?"

"She will never know from him," John said.

"Nor from me," Hester rejoined.

A silence followed, broken by Hester.

"Mrs. Pendleton discovered that I was to return home and came to see me. She is coming here for the summer, and earlier than usual. She's a dear soul, and I shall be glad to have her with me."

"And you will have the summer boarders as usual?"

"Yes, I must on Ethel's account."

John walked about the room impatiently.

"Ah me!" he exclaimed, "and I have been offered the position of manager by the Dean Ship Company, with double my present salary, to represent the company in South America. Things come your way with indecent haste, when you are apathetic or don't care for them. In this life

we are forever reaching for the unattainable, overlooking the opportunities under our very nose, or, what is still worse, trampling them under foot. We are a nation of malcontents, whose goal is a mirage from which we are separated by seas of disappointment and despair."

"And you will accept the position?" Hester's voice was tremulous.

"I can't say," he answered, "my uncle is urging me to accept it. It is a flattering offer."

John's devotion had never affected her as it did now; nor had it been brought home to her what her life would be if he were to go out of it. Until the possibility that he might go presented itself, she had never considered what that going might mean. And now the fear filled her with sickening dread. Yet was it not better so? What hope could she give him? Young as she was, inexperienced though she might seem, she knew the world. She had learned at a rapid rate, and at an almost fatal cost, that it is not to be trifled with. It has its unwritten laws, which once transgressed, allows neither time nor tears to soften the punishment it imposes. It exacts its pound of flesh, and jealousy scans the weight to see that it is not cheated out of its just due. Its scourging wrath may slumber, but the ghost of the offence stalks abroad and confronts the offender who, with a sense of security, is emerging from dread and fear and dares to raise his head.

Hester realized that the name that she had

brought back to her old home had been, in the eyes of this same exacting world, soiled. This same world did not demand the why or the wherefore; it might have been smirched with or without reason; in truth or in seeming. With these considerations it did not concern itself; nor was it inclined to tax its reasoning powers in arriving at its own sweet, infallible verdict. It believed what it had been told, and repeated this same, sotto voce, taking care that it lost nothing in the telling.

CHAPTER XXI

MILLIE SPEAKS HER MIND

In strident tones they sing His praise,
With heads held high in air;
'Twere better if their hearts they'd raise,
In meek and voiceless prayer.

THE calm of the New England Sunday morning was broken only by the clanging of the village church bell; and the land in its spring dress looked its loveliest. Dandelion blossoms nodded their heads complacently, and the few hardy flowers in front of the Blair home that, with admirable persistence if not commendable judgment, dared to brave the chill wind, opened their petals in welcome to the warmth that the sun grudgingly bestowed. Even the sea was on its good behavior; and not even a ripple disturbed its surface or interrupted the peace that was abroad.

John Cary had been invited to breakfast, and Millie was fretting herself into a state of irritability over her muffins. They would rise, and then she was as sure that they wouldn't rise. The exact state and life of the baking powder worried her, until she could not express herself in becoming terms. She had bought it only the day previous, "but," she moaned, "goodness

knows how long it had stood in Deacon Prouty's store." She thought the cover was loose when she took it off; and now she was sure that the powder was damp. In spite of her fears and lamentations the muffins continued to rise most beautifully. But peace was to be denied her. What if they should fall? She knew the fire wasn't hot enough. But the muffins cooked into a creamy brown, and demanded almost audibly, to be eaten at once. "Where was John? Had that Slack gone off just as breakfast was ready?" Not even Hester could enlighten her, and in a shrill voice she called from the porch—"Breakfast!"

The two men were in the rear of the house and did not hear the call. John was saying:

"——and is that his boat?"

"Yes," answered Slack, shading his eyes with one hand and looking out over the water, "thet one layin' long side Bill Blake's schooner."

His gaze turned seaward and he muttered musingly, "Wonder what thet steamer be? She's kitin' right 'long."

John's interest in the passing steamer was not pronounced.

"Did you say you saw Fenton?"

"Yes, I seed 'im." Slack's eyes still followed the line of smoke on the horizon.

"Where?" John demanded.

"O, 'round th' wharf som'ere."

"What was he doin'?"

"Wall, th' last I seed uv 'im he wer' smokin' a cig'rette, an' mutterin' ter hissself somethin' 'bout 'mirin' someone er other." With deep concern he continued: "Gum! I'd like ter know where thet ther' steamer's bound. Com' ter think on't, I heered someone say thet Fenton warn't goin' ter be in town ter day."

A sigh of relief escaped John. He kicked a stone, and it went bounding down the incline into the water, then looked again into the face of his companion. Slack, however, seemed unconscious of John's presence, so absorbed was he in the movements of the steamer.

"Where did you hear that Fenton wasn't to be in town?"

"I was in my boat," came the guileless answer.

"When was this?"

"Yest'day arternoon."

"Were you alone?"

"Yep, on'y when I wer' talkin' ter Bill Blake."

"Where were you at the time you heard of Fenton being away?"

"I wer' a lyin' 'long side of Bill's schooner, a talkin' ter Bill. Don't know how I came ter 'member it. Thet steamer must be makin' 'bout ten knots."

John remained silent for a full minute. How much Slack knew or suspected of Fenton's motives he could only surmise. But he knew his man: he had tried him and he trusted him; and determined to take him—in a measure—into his

confidence. He laid his hand on his companion's shoulder:

"Slack," he said, "I have a favor to ask of you."

"Well, sail in. What be it?"

"I want you to find out, if you can without exciting suspicion, where Fenton has gone, and when he will return."

Greater men than Slack have been taken off their guard. Long afterwards he reproached himself for his quick tongue. He blurted out:

"I know where he is. He's as safe as a lobster caught in one o' them ther' traps out in th' bay."

It hardly needed the surprised look that John flashed at him to tell him he had blundered. But the resourceful Slack was quick to recover himself. A look of guile, stupendous in its effrontery, overspread his features. The innocence of childhood shone from the eyes that sought those of his companion.

"Thet is," Slack drawled, "I guess we could find him ef yer wanted ter see 'im bad." He looked John steadily in the eyes and waited for an answer.

"I supposed from what you said, that you knew where Fenton was."

"Me? How'd I know? Yer see, I'm 'lone so much, I git in th' habit er talkin' ter myself. Why, I talk ter th' fishes an' th' sea gulls. Yer don't want ter take any notice er me; but ef yer

tryin' ter find out where Fenton is, I ken 'quire er Bill Blake. P'r'aps he'll know."

Millie's voice interrupted further conversation, and the two men entered the house with the consciousness burning within them of having spoiled the muffins. They vowed they would do penance by devouring them to the last one, which they did, without any perceptible effort, and with a keen relish; and Millie unbent sufficiently to smile her forgiveness.

Slack had donned his best suit, Millie was arrayed in a black satin gown, and, with Hester and John, they walked through the village to the church.

John had timed their departure so that they might arrive before the majority of the congregation. He had hoped to save Hester from what he most feared,—the curious gaze, and the unguarded or vicious comments of the villagers. Of those whom they met on their way to church, some passed with a nod of the head, others stopped and shook Hester by the hand, expressing pleasure at her return. These had been her father's friends, men prominent in the village, and the common fishermen who had known her since childhood; but not a woman took her hand, or gave her more than a passing glance of recognition. One or two turned their heads away, not even replying to Slack's or Millie's "good morning."

John's heart was filled with resentment, and anger raged within him. He thought many and unchristian-like things; and a smothered exclamation of disgust escaped him.

Hester received one hearty, sincere and unaffected greeting. Sally Pitts met her at the door of the church. She had waited there for her and smiled all manner of sweet things, but could not say a word because she was choking, mostly with joy; and Hester's eyes filled with tears. But Sally was not alone: Sam stood beside her, and took the hand Hester held out to him.

"I'm real glad to see yer, Miss Hessie," he said.

Sally insisted on imparting something of a private nature to Hester, and with her eyes bubbling over with happiness, whispered into Hester's ear: "Em," concluded the child, "every Sunday."

"What be yer sayin', Sally?" Sam sheepishly demanded.

"Sally tells me you go to church every Sunday," replied Hester.

"Yaas," answered Sam, "hed a change er heart. Regular member now."

Hester whispered an invitation to Sally to come up to the house as soon as the services were over, and they passed into the church.

While Sally and Hester were talking at the door, John watched the people narrowly. It left no doubt in his mind as to the feelings that they

entertained; and his fears grew with the rage that filled him. He cast a furtive glance at Hester, and the expression of settled calm, and her unconsciously proud bearing, quelled his rebellious spirit of resentment.

The minister read from John viii, 7th verse—"He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her."

He spoke eloquently, but he did not enlist the undivided attention of the congregation. In his words they saw a direct allusion to the one who engrossed their thoughts. His hearers listened to his exhortations, followed his passionate discourse, exchanged looks with their neighbors at his well rounded periods; then fixed their eyes in a bold stare on Hester's face, to satisfy themselves that she appreciated the full import of his words. Wherein they were, if not over charitable, very human. But if they expected Hester to betray the least sign of self-consciousness that she was the object of their special regard, disappointment must have filled their Christian hearts. And it did.

The villagers did not approve of the interest with which Hester followed the minister's words; and her modest, dignified bearing, with a woman's acumen, they designated as "brass." They were not to be fooled by any New York airs, and they lost no time in putting this determination into effect; for they resented what they termed her high handed manner of "carrying off things."

They lacked the knowledge of the subtle art of refined cruelty, when the unspoken word carries with it the power of a knife thrust:—when a remark uttered under the cloak of assumed friendship, or muffled in a web of obscure English, has the power that the insidious smile that accompanies it cannot lessen,—to wring the victim's heart. No, this was unknown to them, and they went about humbling Hester in their own, sweet, simple way.

The service ended, these spotless members of the community, comprised of what is commonly designated the "gentler sex," ambled to the green in front of the church. Here was an uncontaminated atmosphere, and an opportunity to ease their over-wrought feelings of outraged decency. They shook their heads dubiously and sorrowfully, and hoped, prayed, and lamented in the same breath; and spoke of an awful warning to young people in general, and to village maidens in particular. They dilated upon the snares of city life, and the designing ensnarers, who came among them summers to upset their peace of mind; and their frills and furbelows fluttered acquiescence, while their owners looked in all directions but where Hester was standing, talking to the "Commodore," who, among other things was saying: "Now Hessie, if you believe me, I never was so glad to see anyone in my life."

The good soul should have gone on to her home, which she ruled in a manner befitting her proud

title, or joined her sisters of the outraged feelings. Hester kissed her on the cheek. She believed the "Commodore," and a slight, convulsive twitching about the corners of her mouth threatened her composure.

She bade the "Commodore" good-bye, and, with John, turned homeward; and the good people who remained behind, after having exhausted the subject of Hester's concerns, returned to the threadbare topic of interest which had done duty for the past week—Betty McDonald's ill-fated marriage. Betty was a poor domestic without a home, and faced the prospect of becoming a charge on the state with a soiled name but a stout heart. The man she had clung to through his checkered career of debauchery and idleness had, at the last moment, and without apparent cause, refused to marry her: and he had left her to fight alone the disgrace and disappointment which seemed to be all that was left her. With ill-advised ardor the villagers proffered their sympathy and talked much of a just retribution that would overtake the recalcitrant Tom. But their ill-timed suggestions and offers of assistance were met with language and manner that arrested their vicious interest in Betty's behalf. She could talk, which she did; and her vocabulary was extensive—also lurid. Her defence of the erring lover was forcible and couched in language which the dullest could understand. She said that the fault was hers, and when she desired any of their

help or advice, she would ask for it. They took her at her word, and no hand or heart interposed between her and the workhouse, and to those who talked the loudest about lack of decency, she unfeelingly answered that they were as bad as he was. It is due to Betty to add that she believed what she said;—and there the case rested.

Meantime rebellion had taken possession of Millie, and, when opposite the old wharf, Slack, noting the signs of the approaching storm, sought to escape. Bill Blake, who was making his boat fast to the landing, furnished the excuse, and Slack lingered behind to speak to him.

“How’s things go?” asked Slack.

“Es though they wer’ greased fer th’ occasion,” answered the faithful Bill.

“Fenton put up a fight?”

“He cut up a bit. Gum! th’ roads wer’ rough. Thought we’d shake the guts out er ’im. Left ’im at the camp at two o’clock this morning. ’Twas as dark as a pocket. Lucky I had Joe with me; he knew every inch of the way.”

“Think Fenton’ll find out who yer air?”

“No, we never spoke a word till we left him; but you shud er heered the cuss swear. He ripped and swore, an’ he’d hev th’ law on us. Ho, ho, ho, we’d be hung ef he hed his say. Slacky, let’s take a drink.” And while his companion grinned his approbation and acceptance of the invitation, Bill fished out a half-pint bottle of prohibition whiskey and, unmindful of the day and place,

the two men finished the contents of the bottle with gurgling ohs and ahs, and were at peace with themselves and the world.

John and Hester, followed by Millie, ascended the hill to the Blair home; the young people in silence, Millie vowing vengeance on the female portion of the community.

No one ever dared mention in the spinster's presence the current gossip regarding Hester. The treatment of Hester that she had witnessed in the church, was the effect of a cause of which she was wholly ignorant. It was inexplicable to her, but that only tended to increase her wrath, and, forgetting the minister's words to which she had just listened, she vowed summary and dire vengeance on them, severally and collectively. Hester's reproving glance did not restrain her, and she paused half way up the hill to breathe. Her voice overtook Hester and John as they climbed upward.

"Ter think, Hessie," she cried between little gasps for breath, "them Robinsons never so much as noticed yer, an' all because they got a little money. How'd they git it? I kin tell yer:—sellin' liquor. Thet's how they got it. P'r'aps you don' know as how Jim Robinson was taken up fer sellin' it; an' your own father fined 'im, an' if yer father hadn't been so easy with everyone, Jim Robinson'd bin shet up; an *now* will yer look at the airs o' them women. Good Lor'! Tildy Robinson her ter—well there! I won't say

no more 'bout 'em! They ain't worth it. An' them Tylers! Everyone knows they got their money cheatin' th' guverment on contracts. Jest wait till the next sewin' suckle comes, an' ef I don' hev my say out! Wher' be thet pesky Slack?" But the wisdom teeth of the wary Slack had long been cut.

They entered the hall. Hester kissed the spinster on the cheek.

"Millie, dear," she said, "I'll help you with the lunch. John must be hungry."

CHAPTER XXII

BETTY MCDONALD'S TANGLED LOVE AFFAIRS

Two lives.

Unlike they are, and yet, how like withal.
Has not a sland'rous and unthinking world
Made theirs a common cause? The one, endowed
By nature with such gifts as Heaven lends—
All these are hers, all, all but peace of mind
That woos contentment. The other! Why dwell
Upon those ills which, born of viciousness,
Defile the mind and court oblivion.
To her, poor soul, such peace as silence gives.

IT was the week following Hester's arrival. Betty McDonald sat beside a rough table sewing. The room where she worked was not inviting, neither was it comfortable;—but it was clean. One might naturally expect to find Betty cast down, even in tears, for fate had treated her unkindly. And, as if fate had not accomplished her downfall with sufficient thoroughness and dispatch, the good people of the village came to its assistance and made it complete; for she was ostracized, and left to face the situation as best she might.

The door opened and a man stepped into the room. He was the one above all others whom Betty did not care to see. She threw down her

work on the table, and turned on him threateningly.

"Didn't I tell yer not ter come here agin?" she demanded.

"Yes," he answered doggedly, "but I wanted ter see yer."

"Yer wanted ter see me," she answered, "but yer don' want ter marry me? Haven't yer caused me trouble enough?"

"Well," he said in a tone that he meant to be conciliatory, "yer needn't be so ugly 'bout it. I've tole yer I'm not of th' marrin' kind; but I wan'ter be friends with yer."

"Well, yer can't," she answered without passion. "Go," she said calmly, pointing to the door, "an' don' come agin. If yer word is no good, yer company's no better."

Betty resumed her work, and plied her needle with tireless fingers, until she was again interrupted by a knock at the door. With a startled look—for no one honored Betty with a social call—she opened the door, and Hester stepped into the room.

Betty looked her surprise, and waited for her visitor to speak. She was not pleased, and made no effort to disguise the fact. She was on the defensive, and the expression of her face hardened. Hester had known her for many years and, notwithstanding Betty's wilfulness and crusty temper, believed there was much good in her. She had heard Betty's story—heard of her unhappy

position without work and without means, and she determined to make an effort in her behalf.

"Well," said Betty sullenly, "didn't they tell yer I was goin' ter th' poor-house? What d'yer want here, ter find out why Tom Hardy won't marry me?" She laughed mockingly, "yer'll hev a fine job of it. It's none er yer business!"

Hester seated herself and, unfastening her cloak, it fell from her shoulders to the back of the chair.

"Betty," she said calmly, "I came to see if I could be of any assistance to you."

"Yer didn't! Yer came here to preach how mean Tom has used me, and ter pity me;—and behind my back to laugh at me. That's what they all come fer. Well, yer can't pity me, for I don't want it! But yer can laugh all yer please—but take care yer don't laugh when I'm around, fer I won't have it. Yer hear that!"

Betty's eyes flashed angrily. She cast a look of defiance at her visitor, and disdain was in her eyes and in her voice. Hester colored, but answered gently:

"I did not come to laugh at you Betty,—I came to help you if you will consent to have me. Won't you let me, Betty?"

"No, I won't! Just hear that, and remember it. I won't. Tom Hardy is just as good as the man you had. He wouldn't marry yer and you lost him. Hard luck! an' now yer back agin! Ha, ha, ha," she stopped abruptly, "well, yer

no better'n me, on'y yer got more money! No one goes ter see yer, an' they wouldn't look at yer when yer went ter church last Sunday. O, I heered o' it. Thet's where yer wer' foolish. I never go to church, then they can't laugh at me."

Her speech dissolved into harsh laughter, but it was her easy air of familiarity and mocking tones, more than her words, that stung Hester like a whip-lash. However, she was not there to consider her own feelings. She had a mission to perform, and she would not be turned from it.

"Betty," said Hester, "I did not come here to discuss my concerns, but to offer you such assistance as it is in my power to give. How can I help you, Betty?"

"Yer can't," came the answer doggedly.

"Is it as bad as that, Betty? Is there no hope that he will marry you?"

Betty looked up eagerly. She seemed to grasp at the words, as if hope were not dead within her; then her sullen mood returning, she said in a scoffing tone: "What do you care?"

"Betty, I do care. You used to trust me. Come, Betty dear, let me try for the sake of your future."

Hester had touched the heart spring, and Betty dissolved into wails, and wrung her hands while the tears ran down her cheeks.

"O, it's no use," she cried between her sobs, "I've asked him a hundred times why he ever

promised me if he didn't mean to keep it, and he always sez the same thing,—thet he's not of th' marrying kind. No, it's no use," she moaned.

"Let me ask him," Hester urged.

"You?" her discordant laugh filled the room, and Hester unconsciously shuddered. Betty stopped, but her eyes still laughed. "He'll tell yer ter go straight ter th' divil."

Hester crossed to where the woman sat and smoothed her hair gently. This sort of treatment was new to Betty, and she did not know whether to resent it or not. She looked up into Hester's face, in whose eyes she read a tenderness that soothed the rebellious spirit within her.

"Let me try," said Hester gently, "let me try. Send me to him, Betty. Let me go to see him. Let me talk with him, Betty dear, and perhaps—perhaps——"

Hester's soft entreating tones again sent the tears into the eyes of the unfortunate woman. With Hester's arms about her, she rocked to and fro moaning softly.

"Why did yer come here?" she wailed, "I wer' a gettin' used ter it, an' I didn't care. An' now yer clean upset me. I don't mind yer goin' ter see him, but it won't do any good; he'll only cuss at yer. But yer not like the others, an' I ken trust yer." She became calmer; and the two women, so unlike, yet having the common bond of the world's curse upon them to draw them together,

spoke of the future with something like hope; and their spirits rose as the plans that Hester mapped out took form.

Hester's mission was but half completed. It was still early, and she must yet see the man that Betty loved. When Betty had said, "They were as bad as he was," she pointedly referred to the female portion of the village people, or the element which was clamoring that justice be done to her. It was more than probable that Betty was right, and knew whereof she spoke. An inflexible and fixed standard of morals they proclaimed to the world was theirs, but they vaunted their virtue in strident tones, and with indecent ardor, which set you to thinking: and that is not conducive to peace of mind, and is bad for the soul, for—being human—one who thinks of such things, discovers failings in others that had their birth in his own heart.

Their own faults were glaring, perhaps vicious; but the men as a class were just, and Tom Hardy's lot in life had become as unbearable as it was in their power to make it, and his treatment of Betty deserved.

With this knowledge to fortify her request, even the demand she was prepared to make, Hester left Betty, and with a promise to return, sought Tom Hardy's cabin. She entered without knocking. Tom divined her errand and glared at her defiantly.

"Well," he said doggedly, not giving Hester

time to speak, "I know what yer come fer, an' it ain't er damn bit er use. I won't marry 'er nor no other woman!"

Hester almost smiled. Betty's forecast of her reception was distressingly accurate. Undaunted she replied:

"Tom, you're the only man in the village, or on the beach, who swears in my presence."

He looked at her shamefacedly. She had disarmed him for the moment. She waited for him to speak. He did not answer and she continued:

"Tom, do you think you have used Betty fairly—honestly?"

His crest-fallen air encouraged her and she pressed her advantage. "Come, tell me," she urged.

"Well," he answered with a growl, "I can't help it. What's th' good er talkin' about it? I've made up my mind thet I don't want ter git married. She'll soon get over it. It's cost me trouble enough. The boys don't give me a minute's peace from one end of the week to the other."

"They would be justified in not giving you a moment's peace. It is not Betty's fault. She has remained silent, for she loves you—more's the pity. To be frank with you, I think your treatment of her contemptible."

He did not dispute her. He had a faint idea of his own worth;—also of the justice of her remarks.

"Well," he muttered doggedly, "she ain't got

no claim agin me, an' I won't marry her, an' that settles it."

She wished to appeal to the human side of his nature before resorting to a more strenuous course, which she was fully determined to do, if all other methods failed her.

"Tom," she spoke softly, "you have lived a life of idleness—even worse; for through drink, you have sunk to as low a plane as it would seem possible for a human being to reach. You remember my father? I know you do, and the many times his kindness of heart saved you from the punishment that you richly deserved. Stop a moment and think."

His eyes were on the floor, and Hester, noting the effects of her words, continued hurriedly:

"You do not forget, Tom, you cannot. You remember his words of encouragement, do you not? How he begged you to do better, and how you promised him if he would give you one more chance, you would reform. And the day when, though his patience had long been exhausted, sooner than send you to jail, he imposed only a fine. The payment of the money was all that could save you from imprisonment, and you did not have it. My father received the amount of the fine that same night, and you were released:—and to this day you have never learned to whom you were indebted.

He looked up shamefacedly, and eagerly scanned her features.

"No," he said, "I never knew."

"It was Betty who furnished the money, and she begged my father that you should never be told that she paid it. She stood by you through the years of your life that you have squandered. More, I know that she has given you every dollar that she has earned, for Tom, she loves you, though not for one instant are you worthy of it. She believed that you would make a home for her—she had a right to believe it. And now be a man, Tom. Ah! I know you will do what is right. Consider your own happiness and peace of mind as well as hers. Come with me now. Deacon Prouty is a Justice of Peace, and I will be one of the witnesses to your marriage."

It may have been the instinct that even brutes possess that moved him; it may have been what Hester had said. Whatever the power, without a word he took his hat from a nail on the wall, and within the hour, Betty was made Mrs. Tom Hardy and the proudest lady in the land. And Mrs. Tom, not content with quiet bliss, the following day flaunted her lord and master in the eyes of her tormentors, who refused to be surprised; and they sighed compassionately for Hester who had not been so fortunate.

CHAPTER XXIII

MILLIE ANSWERS SLACK FOR THE 999TH TIME

Good Lor'! Didn't I tell yer a few days ago,
Ef yer ast me again what yer answer'd be? No!

JUNE came and all the land glowed with color. A soft breeze was abroad and contentment seemed to ooze from the warm soil and take possession of all live things. The rosebushes, like a virgin conscious of her charms, blushed apologetically. The soft air drove every desire from the heart of man, but to live and to love. Even the sea was content to rest from its long complaining, and soothed itself into a mirror-like placidity. Nature ruled for peace, and only man's innate obstinacy interposed to its completeness.

Ethel had returned from school and the summer guests had begun to arrive. Mrs. Pendleton had been the first, bedecked in gorgeous plumage and smiles. Millie capitulated without reservation and kissed her, which led Slack to do strange things, to wit,—to seek the seclusion of his shanty, where he accomplished the remarkable feat of kicking himself, and performing strange and unseemly antics, accompanying the same with uproarious laughter that could be heard far

over the water. But then, surrender on Millie's part did not occur every day or decade, hence there was cause and excuse for his unusual behavior.

Hester's life had gone on much the same since her return home. She had received the slights and vicious little thrusts offered her uncomplainingly, giving in return kindness and charity. She was not without champions. The "Commodore" spoke her mind freely and to the point; and Millie, in high dudgeon, had severed her connection with the sewing circle, a society duly organized by the church for charitable purposes, but whose chief occupation was the dissemination of gossip,—rank, flagrant, unwholesome gossip.

But polite protests to the treatment Hester received did not satisfy Betty Hardy. She retaliated with deftly aimed blows, delivered with energy and conviction. When the character of Hester's assailants would warrant it, she told things. These were not good to hear, and they were for the most part true; for all knowledge of a certain kind, and of unsavory quality, came into Betty's possession with remarkable ease, and without apparent effort on her part. Moreover, Betty was very well developed physically, and of muscular fitness; and on more than one occasion, when the private character of Hester's traducer was, in truth and all consciousness, beyond the reach of Betty's vitriolic tongue, she had resorted to the unwomanly course of using her fists, which

was not good to see: for women's fists should not usurp the prerogative of their tongues. But Hester went on her way unmindful of it all, and contentment was growing within her.

Of Fenton little was known. His yacht would enter the harbor and, ghostlike, disappear, only to return again at intervals. For a day or a night he would be seen about the village, then go as quietly as he came, where, no one knew, nor did anyone seem to care; but he managed to keep alive the gossip and, bit by bit, the story of Hester's life while in New York, became known to everyone in the village.

John divided his time between Norton and New York City. He attended to his duties, watched over Hester's interests, and went on loving her in his own way, with the hope ever with him that some day she would return his love.

There was a mysterious something in the lives of the inmates of the Blair home that baffled Millie. Hester was subdued, rarely smiled and seemed unlike herself. John, when he called, was morose and had little to say; and Millie declared that, "Slacky jest grinned an' acted as though he didn't know nothin' an' kept thet ter himself." Even Ethel was imbued with the general air of mystery that pervaded the household. She declared that everyone had changed, and seemed unnatural; she didn't understand it, and was ill at ease; and even Slack who had been her counsellor since childhood, could not explain

away the gloom that enveloped the family. Preparations were under way for Ethel's birthday party, but even these she entered into in a half-hearted manner.

It was toward the middle of the month. The rays of the descending sun touched the breeze-fretted surface of the bay with amber, gold and dull purple, and sent armies of brilliant gleams dancing seaward. It was a time for love and lovers, and Slack and Millie improved the opportunity to sit outside in the open space in front of the house. To Slack's appeal Millie was moved to reply with undisguised irritability.

"An' I tell yer agin, Slack Dorkins, for the nine hundred and ninety-ninth time, no, an' *no*, an *no*. I'm *not* goin' ter git married while things air as they air. Isn't it enough that they're all wrong 'thout pesterin' me 'bout gittin' married?"

"But, Millie," he pleaded, "'Twouldn't make any difference ter our way er livin'. I've saved up a good bit in th' last twenty-five years, an' th' folks'll never want fer money. Yer needn't wait any longer on thet account."

Millie, who had been knitting, paused at her work and rewarded him with a look of quizzical amazement.

"Once in a while," she said, "'bout 's often as th' moon changes, you do say somethin' quite sensible. It's all thet keeps me from losin' patience with yer. Sense Hessie got back from New York ther' do seem ter be some ter'ble mystery. I

don't know half th' time whether I'm standin' on my head er my heels."

Slack received his refusal philosophically. He had been over the same ground many times, and Millie's answer and rebuff he listened to with smiling complacency.

"John isn't the same," Millie continued, as though refusing an offer of marriage was an every day occurrence, "afore he went ter New York ther wern't a more light-hearted boy 'round. Now yer kin hardly git a word out er him. Even Ethy is changed. She don't seem th' same since she got hum from school. Whatever 'tis, is fer th' best. The Lord hes His own way er smoothin' out things, an' I do believe thet His way is the best way." And with this wise assertion she rose and entered the house.

Ethel had listened to the last part of Millie's remarks, and when Millie had disappeared, walked softly to where Slack was sitting and placed her hands over his eyes.

"O, I know who owns them little hands," Slack said in a voice as gentle as the night breeze, "ther as soft as the robin's breast when he comes in the spring." He pressed her hands to the side of his rough, weather-beaten face. "Sit down 'side me, Ethy. D'yer know, yer the only one that'll hev anything ter say ter old Slacky? Millie's so dern cranky thet yer can't go near her."

Ethel was his baby. She filled the heart and the life of this childless man, and he bestowed

upon her affection, and almost idolatrous love, that was pathetic in its yearning tenderness. So it is apt to be with one who is much alone, or pursues a solitary vocation. The heart's longings center on someone,—the heart clinging to that one with doglike fidelity and unreasoning faith. Ethel was to him his daughter and comrade, and he romped and played with her with the ardor of one of her years. With her, he was a child at heart, with a woman's tenderness. Since Ethel's childhood, with the candor and trust of youth, they had shared together their joys and their sorrows; and they were now conspiring to wring from Millie the long delayed consent to the fisherman's suit. To this end they were seriously considering the advisability of enlisting the sympathies and advice of Mrs. Pendleton, for, as Slacky naively asserted, "she'd hed experience and might give 'em some pints."

To his mournful reference to Millie, Ethel replied:

"Never mind Slacky, dear, she loves you, I know she does."

"Maybe she do, but she hev a mighty queer way er showin' it."

"She only feels as we all do," Ethel replied, "that something is wrong. Poor dear Hessie! And John is as serious as if he had lost a fortune." She sighed and looked down dejectedly. "Why, I feel quite aged myself." Then her eyes sought her companion's and she continued with

animation: "There is one who never changes; one who is as constant as the North Star, as patient as a mother with her first born, and is always cheerful; one whom everybody loves and who loves everyone. He is the best and dearest friend we have in the wide, wide world."

"Do I know 'im? Ef I don't I'd like ter."

"Yes, you know him."

"P'r'aps I kin guess who he is. How do he look?"

"He is quite tall."

"Yaas."

"He has blue eyes—a Roman nose—a fierce looking mouth—fuzzy hair that is never combed——"

"As bad as mine?" Slack asked incredulously.

"Just—like—yours."

"Same color?"

"Yes, the same color."

"I didn' believe ther were 'nother sech head er hair in the county! Millie sez there ain't. What's his name? I want ter see thet head er hair."

"I'll give you three guesses."

"Will yer? Well here goes. Captain Edwards. He's the wust lookin' man 'long shore——"

"No! two more guesses."

"Seth Binks! He's got a face like—like——"

"Wrong again. One more guess."

"Now ther's only one more thet I kin think

on, an' he's so homely—well I can't tell yer how homely he is—Zeke Newcomb."

"Wrong again. Don't move, Slack, and I'll show him to you." She stood behind the settle on which he sat, and taking a small mirror from her pocket, with one hand around his neck, she held the mirror before him.

"There he is," she said, "and he is the dearest, best, old Slack in the world; and I wouldn't have one hair in his dear old fuzzy head different from what it is." She kissed him on the cheek.

"Ah, Ethy dear, yer th' same little baby girl that I trundled in my arms. D'yer remember how I used ter wait fer yer at the foot uv the hill yonder an' carry you on my shoulders ter th' house, an' how yer used ter pull old Slack's hair?"

"Yes."

"An' I allus demanded payment for the ride. D'yer remember what yer gave me fer tootin' yer up th' hill?"

"One kiss when you walked, and two when you ran up the hill."

"Thet's it, Ethy dear, thet's it. An' I never wer' so well paid fer doin' anythin' in my life. Them wer' happy days, little one, happy days."

"They'll come again, Slacky dear, they'll come again. Now I want you to come with me and look at the flower garden. I'm sure I saw two weeds growing in the petunia bed."

“Did yer? Ther’ life will be as fleetin’ as a summer love.”

Millie came from the house, and casting an appealing glance at Ethel, settled herself comfortably with her knitting.

“Ethy dear,” she said, “I’m so nervous, thet I don’ know what I’m about half the time. Seems though there wer’ a great black cloud ready ter drop on us. Slack Dorkins, *will* yer set down? I allus said trust in the Lord. He does everything fer th’ best, an’ gives ter them as is desarkin’.”

Slack walked to where Ethel was standing and, placing her between himself and Millie, spoke:

“Em! Ethy says I’m uv th’ desarkin’ kind, don’ yer, Ethy?” Receiving an encouraging nod he continued: “I’ve trusted in the Lord fer the past twenty years, ’n I don’ see as I’m nearer my reward ’n I wus twenty years ago.”

Millie tossed her head and maintained a disdainful silence. Slack held a whispered consultation with his ally, and receiving a gentle push and a whispered command to go ahead, continued:

“D’yer think, Millie, ef I wer ter go on trustin’ in th’ Lord, I’d hev my reward in this world, er would I hev ter wait till th’ next?” A congratulatory nod from his fellow conspirator, and an energetic toss of the head from the enemy, left the result of the last attack in doubt. Slack continued: “My patience has bin pretty good, don’t yer think so Millie? Twenty years!”

A muttered exclamation that some one was "a pesky nuisance," warned Slack that conditions were not propitious, and he beat a hasty retreat in the direction of his shanty, beckoning to his fellow comrade-in-arms to continue the assault.

An owl heralded the deepening twilight with a discordant screech; and the lights from the village flickered in feeble response to the call. The sea was singing its night song. The crescent-rimmed moon hung in the western sky and dipped into the sea, and the stars emboldened by its impotent youth, blinked a merry good-night, and shone with proud and unrivaled brilliancy. That little night prowler, Sally Pitts, having entered the house from the rear, and finding it deserted, came through the front door, cuddled herself at Millie's feet, and laughed riotously. As if Heaven had ordained that peace were to be denied the spinster, Sally asked: "Aunt Milly, why don't you marry Slack?"

CHAPTER XXIV

JOHN FIGHTS FOR THE WOMAN HE LOVES

No sword, no shield, no armor bright,
No trophies for the victor wait;
No prancing steed bears war-like knight,
Bedecked with gaudy pomp of state.
Yet never cause more holy, just—
Nor one to lend the victor fame.
Ere this, have heroes bitten dust,
For the honor of a woman's name.

THE last week of June came, leaving events behind to resolve themselves into history as best they might. The summer guests had arrived in numbers, and a holiday air was abroad.

Life for Hester was becoming less burdensome, and the work that she found to do among the poor of the village, occupied her time not devoted to the care and comfort of the summer boarders.

Every incident in the daily life of the villagers was fastened upon to do duty as a topic for gossip, and they ceased their open manifestations of disapproval and censure of Hester's conduct, as their interest waned. They received her with tolerance, never allowing her, however, to forget that their sufferance was tentative; and this they brought home to her in little ways that only a woman can devise. Still, she was satisfied to

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work, and in her own way to fulfil the life that destiny had willed to her.

Love never grows old by waiting, and Cary's love fed on a yearning desire and a hope that would not die. Again and again he had put off his answer to his uncle's importunities that he should accept the position in South America, giving always the same reason for delay—he had not had sufficient time to consider it. He did not press his suit with Hester, for he knew that shame and sorrow hung heavy upon her, and he felt that she would not consent that he should share her burden with her. He knew her unselfish nature,—knew that the treatment she had received at the hands of those who should have trusted her, stood between them. Yet, still he hoped, and hoping, waited; and a savage resentment against a debasing world grew within him.

Sam Pitts had plunged into the maelstrom of commerce, and, in an old boat-house standing beside the wharf, was making a modest bid for a share of the patronage that Deacon Prouty claimed as his own. Sam's stock of goods was comprised, for the greater part, of fishing tackle and groceries of the dried and tinned variety; and Sally, in her father's absence, served the customers, and tried to appear very matronly and business-like.

It was early evening and Sally was alone in the store. Through the large window that opened on the water side, threatening clouds could be

seen scudding across a leaden sky. The air was sultry, and a distant flash of lightning turned the bay into a sheet of flame. The door was ajar and Hester entered.

"My! Miss Hester," said Sally, "how you scared me! Do you think we'll have a thunder storm?"

"No," Hester replied seating herself beside her. "It's heat lightning. I don't believe it will storm."

"I love to see it. Don't you? I'm not afraid."

Hester smiled. It was like Sally to love a tempest. As for fear, that was beyond her. The gathering gloom seemed to intensify the pallor of the child's face, and her eyes, as she looked up at Hester, shone like sapphires set in gray-white marble. She tried in her youthful way to read what was written on the face that looked sadly down upon her, but her judgment was guided by instinct, not experience. Sally was endowed by a depth of thought, and a discernment far beyond her years, and in Hester's expression the child read a studied calm, that was tinged with the shadow of melancholy. Hester's smile did not deceive her—it lacked the candor, the flashes of merriment when the heart speaks. However much it deceived or escaped notice in others, it worried Sally, who saw, and did not understand, and with her eyes fixed on Hester's face in an inquiring gaze, she tried to divine the cause that had wrought the change.

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"Miss Hester, aren't you always happy?" she asked with the directness of childhood.

"Not always, Sally dear."

It was the smile that accompanied the words that Sally could not fathom.

"Why aren't you happy? Is it because you have lost something?" Sally's thoughts were fixed upon a piece of paper sewed into a little cloth bag that she wore around her neck.

"It is not for what I have lost, Sally dear, but you would hardly understand even were I to tell you. There are sorrows and troubles that you know nothing of, and I trust you never shall!" Hester pressed her cheek to Sally's, and her arm, that was around the child, held her close. "I wouldn't wish you to suffer," she continued, "but I envy you Sally."

"Me?" Sally's eyes sought Hester's in incredulous wonder. "And you are so big and beautiful!" she exclaimed.

Hester smiled wearily. "Beauty doesn't bring happiness, Sally, no more than color brings warmth. It is the heart that is the home of happiness, and the face can only disclose whether the door is open or shut."

Sally was but dimly conscious of her meaning, and remained silent.

A sheet of lightning bathed the water of the bay in a lurid glare, and played upon the masts and spars of the floating craft in the little harbor.

The wind sighed threateningly, and the sound of distant thunder came through the open door.

"Sally," Hester continued, "Keep your little heart locked up, and hold fast to the love that is yours. Happiness is like a caged bird that is forever trying to flutter away, and if it escapes, dies, and leaves nothing but emptiness and desolation behind."

"Dear me, how much you know," sighed Sally, now thoroughly mystified.

"Sally dear, it has cost me much to learn."

Through the open door a fierce gust of wind swept through the room. Two of the villagers entered.

"Hessie," said Mrs. Bagly, the elder of the two, "Mother Bently's a cryin' fer yer, an' takin' on at a terrible rate. She won't 'low no one ter do anything fer 'er, an' sez ef yer don't come back, she'll get up; an' if she do, 'twill kill her, sure."

Mother Bently was Hester's especial charge. She was an old woman, past seventy, bedridden, and being kept alive by the charity of her neighbors. But this did not appease her wrath. On general principles she despised all human kind; but she reserved her bitterest hate for those around her whom she had known during her lifetime. These she declared were mean,—more, they were downright bad; and she'd have none of them. And she claimed to know whereof she spoke. In any case, they feared her tongue, and

gladly turned the care of her over to Hester, and were devoutly happy to be rid of her. The care of Mother Bently was too arduous to be contemplated within the scope of charity. Besides, it would be good for Hester. She should do something to show that she appreciated the kindness with which they treated her—considering.

Hester went out, and, passing by the open window that faced the sea, turned in the direction of Mother Bently's home. There was a narrow board walk in the rear of the building raised a few feet above the ground, for protection from the waters of the bay, that lapped the foundation on which the store rested, and it was over this that Hester walked. As she went by the window, a flash of lightning illumined the bay, and brought out the beauty of her features that were outlined against the dark-green waters.

"She's beautiful, no sayin' agin it," said Mrs. Bagly, exchanging a look with her companion. "Pity he didn't marry her. It's allus the way with them kind."

Sally looked up into the speaker's face inquiringly. "Why is it a pity, Mrs. Bagly?" she asked.

"Why? O—" Her ingenuity to frame a reply was spared by the entrance of Fenton.

The women looked at him with the deference due to wealth. He was known to every one in the village because of his lavish expenditure of money; and they regarded him as being far re-

moved from ordinary mortals. The two women were aware that Fenton had known Hester in New York, and they hoped he would speak of her. Mrs. Bagley whispered to her companion under her breath: "ef he'd only come two minutes earlier."

But fortune favored them. With a glance about the store Fenton asked:

"Was it not Miss Blair whom I just saw leaving here?"

Mrs. Bagly gave a little gasp of joy and courtesied herself into notice. "Yes," she answered, "thet wer' Hessie." Her eyes blinked in the semi-darkness, and she waited with ill-concealed eagerness for him to speak. He rewarded her with a smile—such a smile as the damned might see on the face of their tormentors. The smile, however, was not expressive enough to suit the guileless heart of Mrs. Bagly,—it was, in a way, too general. Besides, she feared that he might change the subject, and she would never forgive herself if she missed this opportunity. Blinking at him smilingly, she ventured:

"Yer knew Hessie in New York, didn't yer?"

Fenton smiled again, but it was a smile of disdainful regard, mingled with disgust, for the creature before him. Bad as he was, he shuddered as he looked at this human vulture,—in anticipation, gloating over the character of one of her sex that she would pick to pieces.

"Yes," he said, "I knew her."

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To the rapidly increasing darkness they paid no attention, nor did they see John Cary looking in through the open window, with an expression on his face as dark and threatening as the clouds that hung in the heavens.

Since the day of Hester's return the two men had not met. John, with the fear in his heart that he would do Fenton bodily harm, avoided him. Though rational in all things, John dared not trust himself in the presence of the man who, above all others, he blamed for the suffering that Hester had endured. When he had looked into the store and saw Fenton, his first impulse was to turn back,—to get away from any possibility of an encounter with him. He feared his own strength, and he feared the wild, uncontrollable passion that the sight of this man awakened in him. But at the sound of Hester's name he remained, rooted to the ground, with the blood dancing to his finger tips.

"Yes," Fenton was saying, "pity she came to New York, and a greater pity that she—well never mind, it can't be helped now."

Mrs. Bagly's overwrought feelings found vent, "There, Sary Dunn," she said turning to her companion, "what'd I tell yer?"

A crash of thunder warned the women that the storm was approaching and, when they opened the door to depart, above the dying echoes rose Sam Pitts' voice:

"Sally, go over to the house for my sou'easter

will yer? Boat's draggin' her anchor. Got ter go out ter her."

The women and Sally went out, and the wind slammed the door shut. With a serpent-like dart, a tongue of flame cleft the heavens in two, and loosed the thunder that crashed over their heads in rumbling peals. John, with the lightness of a cat, sprang through the open window and stood before Fenton.

The two men stood motionless for a full minute, while the tempest seemed to burst over their heads in a succession of deafening crashes. The bay and harbor were ablaze one minute, and the next instant blackness, pall-like and impenetrable, settled over land and sea, to disappear again when the tongued flames shot across the sky, and into the sea beyond the line of the horizon.

The two men faced each other without fear, the passion of hate burning within them.

"God!" John exclaimed, "if you were a man, or the semblance of a man, there'd be a satisfaction in thrashing you; but you're a thing, a blot and an insult to the name of manhood. You're a dog, worse than a dog, a cur whose bastard blood proclaims him an outcast among his kind."

Deafening thunder shook the building to its foundations, and rolled away in an army of echoes.

"That's why," said Fenton, you hired two assassins to waylay me on the road and, after

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overpowering me, drive twenty or thirty miles into the woods, and leave me in a hunter's shanty. Were you afraid to meet me openly?"

John did not understand. It was the first that he had heard of the encounter. He believed that Fenton was inventing this through fear, or for motives of his own.

"What you speak of," John said, "does not concern me."

"You lie!" Fenton fairly hissed the words.

John laughed scoffingly, "Do you think the lie given by you would move me? Bah! You degenerate! I came into this store with one fixed purpose—that before you go, I will leave my mark upon you. Do you hear? You craven coward! You slanderer!" He grasped a chair, and using his feet for a brace, wrenched the back off with such force, that the chair went crashing into the wall. He threw the rung, which was of heavy wood and formidable in appearance, at Fenton's feet.

"Defend yourself," he said, "you are not my match physically."

Fenton picked up the stick. They rushed at each other. John warded off the lunge that Fenton made at him with his left hand, and dealt him a telling blow, that sent him reeling against the side of the building. It maddened Fenton, and he rushed at John in a blind rage. He changed his tactics, however, and instead of aiming at John's head, directed a vicious blow at his guard

arm, wishing to disable him. John was unprepared for this, and the stick came down on his wrist with telling force. He realized Fenton's design when it was too late, and furious with pain and his own unguardedness, drove his uninjured hand with terrific force at Fenton. It caught Fenton on the neck and chin, and nearly lifted him from his feet. John could have followed up his advantage and had his man at his mercy, but above the roar of the storm came a cry from the direction of the window. It struck John to the heart and he turned his head. It was a fatal move, for with a spring, Fenton raised the stick. It came down with resounding force on John's head back of the left ear, and he fell limp and lifeless on the floor. Again the cry rose above the storm, and Hester rushed through the door to the prostrate form on the floor, the blood oozing from a deep wound in his head.

"Coward!" she exclaimed, but her voice was lost in the rumbling roar outside.

Fenton said nothing but, laughing scoffingly, turned on his heel to the door, to be confronted by the tall, angular form of Sam Pitts, on whose face was an expression not good to see. Fenton shot a hasty glance at the window. He did not like Sam's attitude, nor the threatening gleam in Slack's eyes who stood looking in at the window, the water running in a miniature stream from the sou'easter that he wore, and trickling down his bronzed face.



“It was no time for talk — action, immediate action —
was necessary.”



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As between Slack and the window, and Sam and the door, Fenton's judgment leaned towards the latter. There was really no choice between the two, the only difference being that it was Sam's giant hand that closed upon Fenton's throat, and shook him as a terrier shakes a rat, until Fenton's face turned from red to purple, and Hester's voice saved him from further punishment. Sam then hurled him through the open door, where he received an undignified kick from Slack, who refused to devote further time to him owing to his anxiety for Cary.

With gentle touches—for they could be gentle, these fishermen—they examined the condition of John's injuries.

It was no time for talk, action,—immediate action—was necessary. Words could be indulged in later.

The village doctor bent over him, dressed the cut in the head of the injured man, and managed to fill Hester's heart with sickening dread.

Within the hour John was resting in his own home, and had he been conscious, and seen the woman he loved bending over him with a world of tenderness in her tear-bedimmed eyes, he would have sworn loudly and with conviction, that the fates had been kind to him. But he did not know. And the morning sun, after the night of storm, shone with added brilliancy; but to the clouded brain of the man in the darkened room, all was as black as Egyptian night.

CHAPTER XXV

JOHN'S RECOVERY

Throughout the night, throughout the day
In dreamless sleep her lover lay.
She touched his lips with kiss as light
As angel's foot-falls of the night
He woke, he sighed—a sigh of bliss
And waking, begged another kiss.

THE story of the encounter between John and Fenton, burst upon the village with the intensity of the storm of the previous night. Of late there had been a dearth of news, and this event seemed a special dispensation of Providence. They discussed it and commented upon it; censured all the parties concerned; and out of the meagre information obtainable—Slack would not talk, no one dared ask Sam Pitts, John was unconscious many hours, and ill and weak many more, Hester could not be seen,—she was hovering over John with the tenderness of a woman who loves, and who sees the object of her love in danger—the good people were thrown upon their own resources and ingenuity for facts. But, undaunted, they wrestled manfully, or rather womanfully, with the situations; and out of the congestion of details evolved the following: that Fenton and Hester had met by appointment;

that John had surprised them; that he had attacked Fenton who had broken a chair over his head; that Hester was the only one to blame; and that John was a blind fool to have anything to do with her, when he knew what she was; and there were Mary Briggs, Deacon Prouty's two girls, who sang in the choir, and who were as near ladies as girls could well be, who could make John as good a wife as a man might ask for,—“even ef they hedn't ben ter New York an' lived—no one knew how.”

Hester, meanwhile, was kissing John back to consciousness. He opened his eyes with a realizing sense of his position and the cause that placed him therein, and with a feeling of exquisite delight when he felt the lips of the woman he loved lightly touch his own. Surprised in the act, she blushed rose red, and forgot that he had been in danger. Recovering herself, she asked him how he felt and, observing her confusion, he laughed uproariously for a sick man, and begged for another kiss.

Hester, being assured that all danger was over, mildly scolded him, for that is the way of woman.

When the role of convalescent could no longer be prolonged, with cheeks glowing with color, and heart rebelling against his offensively healthy condition that made further efforts at nursing on Hester's part mere pretense, John pronounced himself well again. He went about his usual duties, and scowled upon his over-anxious friends

and the world in general, because he could not be comfortably sick, even for a reasonable time, and be nursed by the woman he loved. But the stolen kisses were a golden memory that filled him with unreasoning delight, and all things else seemed mean and paltry in comparison.

John sat on the porch talking to Hester. The summer guests were preparing for a fishing trip, and Millie's voice came through the open door and windows in fretful complaining. Slack scuffingly approached.

"Slack," John said, "did you know Fenton had been attacked by two men and, after being overpowered, dragged off to a camp twenty miles or so and left there?"

Slack manifested but a mild interest.

"Cum ter think on't, 'pears ter me I did hear som'thin' 'bout it."

John watched him narrowly. "Do you *know* anything about it?"

Slack looked his surprise.

"How should I know. I jest remember hearin' som'on' tellin' 'bout et. Let—me—see! Shudn' wonder ef it wer' Bill Blake. Maybe 'twas."

John was perplexed. He realized that it would be a waste of time to attempt to draw from Slack more than he wished to disclose, allowing that the fisherman did have knowledge of what Fenton had stated. He looked at Slack, whose expression of countenance was that of a sleeping child.

"What does Bill know about it?" John asked.

"D'know! I'll ask 'im ef yer want me ter. Personally, I'd like nothin' better than ter take Fenton twenty miles inter th' woods an' hang 'im up by th' thumbs. The dum skunk!"

John believed Slack meant what he said. He was equally certain that, if Fenton spoke the truth, the fisherman was concerned in the affair, if, in fact, he were not the prime mover. But wringing confidences from Slack when he chose to withhold them, was a task that John did not care to undertake.

Mrs. Pendleton, resplendent in an outing suit of some soft, light colored material, smiled from the doorway. Slack's answering grin enveloped his face. He was fond of the widow, and he made no special effort to disguise the fact.

"I heard Fenton's name as I came through the hall. Tell me, has he taken himself off? I have a tender interest in him."

"Seems ter me," Slack answered, "thet everyone has a special interest in Fenton. John wer' a talkin' as how he got kidnapped an' run inter th' woods."

"So Fenton told me," Mrs. Pendleton replied, "he said that he was overpowered on the road between here and the railroad station by two men, who bound and gagged him, and drove through the woods to a huntsman's camp. He afterwards learned that it was owned by a Mr.

Dimock. The next morning he was forced to walk eight miles through mud——”

Slack's soft chuckle developed into a roar. It brought the guests from the house anxious to join him. They loved mirth, and they loved Slack. It also brought Millie with the remark that, "some folks shud hev more sense," but Slack was beyond the power of Millie's reproving glance.

"How I shud er like ter see 'im! Wonder ef he hed on his patent leathers?"

"But the best of it is," Mrs. Pendleton interjected, "he lays the blame upon John."

"Ho, ho, ho," began Slack, then stopped. "Why John," he said reprovingly, "I wouldn't er thought it uv yer! Besides, yer layin' yerself liable."

John smiled at Slack's audacious coolness. He watched the eyes of the speaker that laughed boldly into his own.

Mrs. Pendleton voiced John's opinion, "I do believe, Slack,"—they were on a very friendly footing, even Millie noticed it—"I do believe you know more of the affair than you care to disclose."

"Now, Mrs. Pendleton," began Slack,—— Captain Edwards's voice interrupted. He was bellowing from the crest of the hill that the boat was ready.

"And you'll come fishing, Mr. Dorkins?"

Mrs. Pendleton hardly needed the quick glance

Slack directed at the door to tell her that Millie was standing there.

"Don't quite see how I kin," he answered.

Mrs. Pendleton could almost feel Millie's scornful glance. She continued sweetly: "Dear me! and we had counted on your going." She turned to the others: "Ladies, can't you persuade him?"

"Do come!" they exclaimed in varying tones of voice.

Slack had one eye fixed on the face in the doorway. He saw the toss of the head; but he felt the withering glance that accompanied it. Mrs. Pendleton smiled sweetly at him. It was a conscious smile and supposedly conveyed a meaning only known to themselves. The smile was resented by at least one of the party, who was on the point of openly referring to the private understanding some people seemed to have, and disclaiming any interest in it.

Mrs. Pendleton, however, gave her no opportunity. She said:

"I have written some verses on fishing. Would you like to hear them, Mr. Dorkins?"

"With pleasure," he answered, bowing and placing his hand over his heart. The action, Millie believed, was wholly uncalled for.

Mrs. Pendleton began:

"We'll fish for fish in the open sea,
When the sea is calm, when the sea is rough,
In the tight little bay, or under the lea
Of the bolder bluff, of the bolder bluff."

If the fish are shy, and with cunning guile
Refuse the bait on a silver hook,
We'll lure them on with a winsome smile,
And a fetching look, and a fetching look.

Or we'll leave the fish with a sigh of regret
And fish for fish of the human kind;
With minnows of love, and a silken net,
For love is blind, yes, love is blind.

The summer wanes, and ere I go,
I'll add one more, 'twill make just ten;
And I'll love them all! I have told them so,
When I come again, when I come again."

Millie made periods and exclamation points with her head and eyes, during the recital, and looked unutterable things at her property, who was listening in open-mouthed and undisguised admiration. A chorus of "Ohs" and "Ahs" rewarded Mrs. Pendleton's effort.

One of the listeners, however, except for a slight disdainful curl of the lips, manifested no outward sign that she had heard Mrs. Pendleton. Her opinion, expressed later was, "thet it was down-right silly."

After the applause had subsided, someone asked: "Can you withstand that, Mr. Dorkins?"

Slack tried to catch the expression on the face in the doorway, but could only see the head dance, and a stray curl bobbing about. He looked at everyone but Millie, who bided her time and harbored her scorn. He rose slowly out of his seat.

"Well," he said, "I don't know but thet I will—being as how th' invertation is so pressin'."

Then it came. A whole morning's pent up irony, in a voice that said that she didn't care for all the smiling understandings in the complex network of the universe. She was addressing her property,—her very own, and what right had he to think for himself? She could afford to assume a slow sing-song tone. She was simply voicing her decision that had been made up before the discussion had been many minutes old.

"P'r'aps yer'll remember, Slack Dorkins, ther's th' wood to be got in; ther's th' garden stuff ter be got ready fer dinner; th' churnin' hes got ter be done *some* time ter-day; *arter* thet, if yer hev any spare time, yer *might* put on a yachting' suit an' go sailin'."

Slack dropped slowly back into his seat with becoming humility. "Don't see as how I kin go ter-day, Mrs. Pendleton. Much erblidged ter yer fer th' invertation. Some other day——"

"O, I am so sorry, my *dear* Mr. Dorkins. You don't know how we shall miss you. How I should like to help you with the churning!"

Captain Edwards's voice said plainly that he was tired of waiting, and the guests slowly descended the hill to the boat landing, followed by Millie's voice protesting against the frivolities of life, and exhorting a divine Providence to be lenient to Incompetents known as summer boarders.

CHAPTER XXVI

“IT IS BETTER THAT YOU FORGET”

You ask me to forget. Though I must part
With all that's dear to me in life, sweetheart,
Grant me the memory of a love that fills
My life with a sweet ecstasy that thrills
The heart. Hopeless it be, mayhap, and yet
I would not if I could, dear love, forget.

IT was the twenty-sixth of the month, memorable in the Blair family as the day preceding Ethel's birthday. A festive feeling was in the air, and the inmates of the old farmhouse were burning with impatience and anticipation. The morrow would usher in Ethel's seventeenth birthday, and with it the festivities with which it was to be marked. Sixteen times, in as many years, had the friends and neighbors of the family celebrated the event, and Hester was determined that in no way should the seventeenth differ from what had gone before. She awaited the day with trepidation, fearing the villagers' ill-concealed aversion for herself might be visited upon her sister. In her determination to live down their distrust and dislike, she had gone on with the arrangements for the party, and she entered into the spirit of the occasion in a manner that be-

trayed none of the dread that filled her heart. She joined in the laughter of the guests with her old time light-heartedness, and Millie and Ethel, noting the change, marveled, and congratulated each other that she was her former self again. She did not, however, deceive Slack, and it hurt him, for he knew what the effort cost her.

History was making fast for some of the actors of our life drama. John was obliged to give an answer to his uncle, who insisted that he either accept or decline the position. It was generally understood that he would accept it. His eyes told that life had gone out of him, and with its going had come the determination to get away—anywhere, where he could not be daily and hourly reminded of his love for Hester.

The guests were lounging upon the porch. The party was under discussion,—in fact, nothing else had been talked of for a week past; and Slack was being plied with questions as to the arrangements for the dance.

Millie was holding a whispered consultation with Ethel as to the advisability of substituting vanilla flavoring for lemon; how long an egg should be beaten to make frosting; and certain vague allusions to cranberry tartlets and plum-pudding, that did not tend to allay the impatience of her listeners. She was happy, as happy as it were possible for her to be, for there was much cooking to do, and therein—to her—lay Heaven. She had forgotten her troubles, and for two whole

days Slack had been allowed to run at large, unheeded and unrestrained, and to revel in luxurious disorder. There was something foreign in his manner; and he went about with a determined air and a confident stride that foretold a happening. There had been many earnest and protracted consultations with Ethel; and he exchanged smiling glances with Mrs. Pendleton that were full of meaning. Many times during the day he found it necessary to confer with the widow, whose experience lent the advice she gave him added weight; and he would leave her with head high, and a confident, self-assured smile.

Hester was alone in the dining hall, standing before the open fireplace, one hand resting on the mantel above it. The talk of the guests jarred upon her nerves; and she was glad to seek quiet and throw off the mask of assumed jollity. The time she had dreaded for months past, had come. To John she must say the word that would take him out of her life. He would know:—he would have the answer for which he had waited, and she must give it to him. It was not of herself she thought. She had schooled her heart and her mind to bear suffering with patient stolidity, and the kicks and the buffets of the world she neither turned from nor resented. But it was the suffering of the man she loved that touched her heart-strings, and her courage dissolved, and left the heart nothing to build upon; for with her answer, came the death of hope. Her refusal was a trib-

ute to the greatness of his love. It was he alone and his future that she considered; for she knew the world, and that world would never forgive her; nor allow him to forget that he had defied its opinion. She was expecting Cary, and with love's quick ear, she recognized his step in the hall before he opened the door. She did not move from her position, and he stood a moment after entering the room, before speaking.

“Thinking, Hester?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered, softly.

“Of whom?”

“Of you, John dear, and what life will be when you are away.”

“Away,” he laughed bitterly, “what a jolly lark 'twill be, with eight thousand miles of ocean between us. And you'll remember——”

“Yes, I'll remember our childish love-making.” Her voice sank to a whisper.

“Indeed yes,” he answered.

“And the winter evenings at the piano.”

Ethel was softly singing an old folk song in the adjoining room, and weaving a net work of harmony round the simple melody. They listened, and neither spoke for some minutes.

“That was one of the songs you loved, John.”

“My God!” he muttered. She could not see his face, or the effort he made to control himself.

“And the moonlight evenings on the bluff. We could hear the boatmen singing, and we made such absurd promises to each other.”

"Absurd," he repeated, "quite absurd."

"And when you write, John dear, your letters will become more and more formal; and then I shall know that—that you forget."

"Would to God that I could! And yet I would not."

"Don't John, it is too late—too late."

"It is not too late," he said passionately, "if you loved me Hester——"

She turned and looked at him sadly:

"If I loved you? If I loved you less I would give you the answer you desire. I will not consent to cloud your life. You know how I am treated in the village."

"The beasts!" he exclaimed.

"Do you realize that they shun me as something unclean? That the friends of my childhood pass me by and turn their heads from me? Go where I may, 'twill be the same. In a woman's case the world never forgets or forgives. Let the breath of calumny once touch her name, all is over. Be she innocent or guilty, it matters not,—the world will have her guilty. No, John, it cannot be."

"My God!" Despair was in his voice and in his face, "do you think I can pluck the image from my heart that I have worn there for a lifetime? That I can break from past associations that have stamped themselves on my heart and brain, until they have become a part of my being—life itself? Is there anything that will change

your answer? Can you give me no hope to live for?—one word that in time you will send for me? ”

“ No, no, John dear, my decision is final. I thank God for your faith in me. I would give more for your trust than——”

“ My faith in you, Hester, is the faith I learned at my mother’s knee. When I lose that faith desire for life shall have ceased; for when my faith in you dies, then dies my faith in womankind. Hester, I will wait.”

“ Don’t, John, don’t open the old wounds and wring our hearts anew. It will avail nothing, and will not alter my determination. When you are far away, when time has healed the wound, write to me, dear friend, and believe me your words will find an answering beat of sympathy in my heart. When at some future time you find some sympathetic helpmate who can, in some degree, fill your life, be assured that I shall offer a prayer that she may be worthy of as true a heart as ever woman loved! ”

What Hester suffered she alone knew. It was too late now to proclaim the truth, even did she desire that the truth be known; but she would not consent to have him take up her burden, however much her refusal cost her. She loved him too well to accept what she deemed a sacrifice, that might influence his life. She had given him his answer in a voice in which love and sorrow struggled for mastery, but controlled by a calm

determination; and it left no doubt in John's mind that it would be useless to try to swerve her from her purpose or decision. Her nature was one that could be influenced only by the highest ideals; and her sense of justice dominated her judgment. She turned to him with the feeling that she had surrendered all that was left for her to give, but with a calmness that told nothing of what the effort had cost her.

"John dear," she said, "it is better that you accept your uncle's offer at once. You have already delayed too long. It will save us both unnecessary suffering."

He had once told her that he was a strong man, with a strong man's feelings. He looked at her, and his eyes said what he could not trust himself to utter.

After a few moments of silence two of the guests hurriedly entered the room, filled with concerns of much moment to themselves. They failed to appreciate the glance that John met them with; —a look that might be construed as wishing them consigned to that place which is so far removed, that it is not for us to consider its exact location. Hester received them with an air of interest.

History has never recorded whether or not Marie Antoinette smiled when she laid her head on the block of the guillotine. Be that as it may, Hester's smile told the guests that they could count upon her interest in their unspoken trouble, which was bubbling from their eyes, and trem-

bling on their overworked tongues. And they—but what had they to do with broken hearts? That undefined complaint is to be found only in story books. They were considering the dance, which was a much more tangible affair.

“Miss Blair, won’t you and Mr. Cary come out on the porch?” they asked. “Do you know, we had arranged to dance the minuet, and someone says that the band can’t play the music.”

Here was a condition of affairs. Hester lent her counsel to overcome the difficulty. John excused himself. He wanted to think, and he sought the bench on the bluff. He muttered something concerning summer guests in general. It is not necessary to record what he said. He addressed his remarks to the sea, and the soft night breezes sighed acquiescently.

Hester explained that the village band could not play the minuet. Their music was of the “play by ear” order, and notes were to them as Greek to a Comanche Indian.

“Couldn’t the piano be moved out to the orchard? And wouldn’t she play for them to dance the minuet?” To which she smilingly consented.

“But they hadn’t rehearsed it, and really, they ought to practise it a few times, a sort of dress rehearsal, you know. Would Hester play it now? They would dance on the porch. What a dear girl she was.”

They formed for the dance and Hester’s hands brought forth the quaint music with uncertain

touch, and the sound jarred upon her nerves, for the heart would be considered. The dancers wrangled good-naturedly with each other and—"would she kindly play it again?" which she did. And thus tragedies and comedies are played under our very eyes, and we do not know it—till the curtain falls.

Meantime in the dining room, Mrs. Pendleton was saying:

"To-morrow's your opportunity! The excitement! The dance!"

"Yes," answered Slack, "but you don't know Millie."

"Dear me," replied her companion, "how little you know women. A woman is like an unbroken horse, she obeys only the man who is her master. You must break her; bring her under control; keep the reins so that she feels that your hands are on them,—and her love is yours."

"Ter-morrer I'll——"

"Now you grasp the situation! Begin by making love to the girls from the village. 'Twill bring Millie to her senses."

"D'yer think so?" he asked.

"I know it. You've dilly-dallied long enough. I'd have lost patience with you long ago. Tell her now or never. My experience ought to give some weight to my advice."

"Yes," agreed Slack, "I think it hed."

She looked at him sharply, but his child-like gaze met her own unflinchingly. They discussed

their plan of procedure, and, while the guests danced, and Hester, with smiling face played,—the hammers of the instrument seeming to pound on her heart-strings,—the conspirators arranged the details to capture Millie’s long withheld consent. But they had not counted upon her entering the room at that moment. Their heads were close together as they whispered their confidence of success.

Millie sailed majestically into the room and cast a haughty, indifferent glance at Mrs. Pendleton, which did not include her companion; and her curls tossed back her disdain with vigorous energy. But her property held himself erect with new-found courage. She took a lamp from the mantel and went upstairs, followed by a gentle chuckle from the wretch who dared believe that on the morrow, he would wring from her consent to become Mrs. Slack, and do his bidding for all time.

They returned to the porch in time to hear the guests thank Hester, call her a “ dear ” and exclaim: “ They had never heard the music of a minuet played so well! She seemed in such sympathy with the dancers.”

“ Mr. Dorkins, is it true that the band consists of but two pieces? ”

“ Generally it do,” Slack replied, “ a fiddle an’ a big fiddle,—an’ it’s a hummer! Beats any five piece band yer ever heered. Dice Robbins plays the bull-fiddle, and when he gets under full sail,

yer'd think a sou'easter wer' comin' down th' coast. Talk uv yer Pagganinies! why he c'n play a chorus-jig on one string, 'n when th' notes ain't thick 'nough in th' tune ter suit 'im, he jest chucks in whole handfuls of his own. Why, Dice's a whole band in himself, and a church organ ter boot; 'n ter-morrer yer'll say as how I'm pretty near right!"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE MORNING OF THE 27TH

Hearts break! What matters it? On with the dance!

IT was the morning of the twenty-seventh. The mysterious hush that precedes the first gleam of light was over land and sea, and nature, awaiting breathlessly the breaking of dawn, seemed to pause in wonderment and view its own marvelous workings, while the darkness thickened as if to hide its charms. It was a calm awakening of a new day: a light appeared in the east and trembled lest it break the spell, then the cloud banks, low on the horizon, blushed a dull red—and the day was born. Smoke curled in listless waves from the chimney tops; and the sails of the early fishermen flapped lazily, as their boats drifted aimlessly at a sluggard's pace.

The inmates of the Blair home were astir. Either hope, despair or joy had taken possession of every heart and mind, and they awaited the day with varying emotions. Within the walls of the farm house all was anticipation; but none were prepared to say just what they expected. There was an air of mystery about everything. Slack was an enigma to all; Ethel felt that some-

thing was wrong, or was about to happen, and almost regretted that she was to have a birthday party. Millie was too busy with the surprises she was preparing,—which took the form of huge cakes covered with a filigree of frosting,—to notice the guests, and they, thinking only of themselves, were uproariously happy in anticipation of the dance. Hester seemed to be the only self-possessed member of the family; but there were dark circles under her eyes, which she assured them were occasioned by a slight headache.

At breakfast the guests were hilarious. They all talked at the same time, and forgot the muffins, which was a deadly offence from Millie's point of view. But they made atonement by draining the coffee urn—for coffee of Millie's brewing was the kind that gladdens the heart, and puts one on an equality with kings. The breakfast finished, they repaired to the lawn to give vent to their exhilaration, for truth to say, they were slightly under the influence of Millie's coffee, for it was not to be trifled with.

Young Stevens began it. He claimed to be an amateur actor; he believed he was meant for better things.

"Heigh-ho! Would to Heaven the time'd fly on apace. The dance! The dance's the thing!"

"Would to Heaven that Ethy had a birthday party every week," added one of the lady guests.

Stevens scowled on her for the interruption, then striking a posture continued: "The slug-

gard sun now pauses in its course to mock at my impatience."

"It do. It doth. Hear him! He's drunk on Millie's coffee."

Placing his hand over his heart with true dramatic fervor, Stevens rewarded them with a stare.

"Could I of my nether limbs a pendulum make, I'd tick the time along with mad, o'erwhelming speed. The hours would minutes be, and this terrestrial sphere would on its axis turn with such a wild abandon that, at stroke of three, pausing to resume its snail-like course, the shock would hurl us into limitless space."

He glared at them with wild-eyed anticipation of applause.

"Limitless fiddlesticks!" came in a chorus.

"Until, carrying us to the unknown pole, the air, compressed till 'twas as a million pounds to the square inch, ere we had time to shiver, return us with a mighty sch-ute, and land us in the heart of that dark continent, where Dusky Belles, *sans* raiment, only such as Mother Nature had adorned them with——" The ladies interrupted him with a protracted, "O!" Undaunted he continued: "would join us in a mad, esthetic dance. No shock to modesty, for our apparel gay would o'er ten thousand miles be strewn; and clothed in smiles and such expressions to a kind Providence of gratitude as would befit our nakedness, we'd return to Nature."

"He's mad!"

"I am," he replied, "for the dance!" He shuffled off a few steps and turned to Mrs. Pendleton who had come from the house.

"Madam!" he exclaimed, "we've returned!"

"From where?" she asked.

"From Mars! Aye, eh faith! From Mars! We found them dancing! We rested for the brief space of eight hundred years! The first figure of the cotillion was yet unfinished! They are dancing yet! And now, fair conqueror of hearts, I'll——"

"He's mad!" they reiterated.

"Hush!" Mrs. Pendleton said. She turned to a lady guest. "The very air is surcharged with madness. It makes me think of one of the pantomimes at dear old Drury Lane that I never could understand. Comedy! Romantic Drama! Tragedy! All rolled into one; and most marvelous! *I* was not concerned in it. That is, as much as I'd like to be. It will be one regret of my life. One lost opportunity." Her sigh was eloquent. "Well, there's this satisfaction, it's the only one I ever missed! First came the announcement of the birthday party; then, directly on its heels, we hear of Mr. Cary's departure for South America. What next, I wonder? How I shall miss Mr. Cary!" She sighed, "do you know, I think him—just—too—lovely! And to think that Hester has refused him! I can't imagine a woman in her senses refusing Mr. Cary!"

"Do you think she cares for him?" asked her companion.

"Care for him! Care for him! She's madly in love with him! How could she help it? I'm in love with him, and so are you, and so is every woman on the place. Look at him! His head, his eyes, the shoulders of a Roman gladiator, the carriage of a prince! O, she must be mad, mad, *mad!*"

"Dear me, every one seems a bit touched. Why in the world doesn't she accept him? I'm free to acknowledge that I wouldn't have the courage to refuse, if he asked *me.*"

"O, Heaven alone knows why she has refused him. The ways of some women are past finding out. She has some powerful reason, and she'll follow what she considers her duty, and wreck both their lives." She raised her hands imploringly and continued: "Will Heaven only point out some way to clear up this trouble before Mr. Cary gets away. South America! Now, if it were only Brooklyn or Hoboken where we could run over from New York to see him. But South America! O!"

Mrs. Pendleton was far too shrewd and observing a woman not to understand the motive that influenced Hester. But she was much too wise a woman to pretend to understand her motive, and too true a woman to speak of what she believed. All of which went to prove her a re-

markable representative of her sex. She knew Hester well, and though she respected her principles, she did not agree with her judgment in making the sacrifice. The widow knew the world,—she knew it well; and she despised it for its hypocritical pretenses. Under her frivolous exterior were hidden the instincts of a pure, noble-minded woman; yet were she in Hester's place, she would have snapped her fingers at the world, and laughed herself into its good graces.

As she finished speaking, Captain Edwards came over the brow of the hill. Mrs. Pendleton loved all men, but she loved best the big, brawny, whole-souled type of which Captain Edwards was a specimen. She saw him approaching, and her smile of pleasure, as she ran to meet him, brought a blush to the face of the kindly fisherman.

"The last victim," said Stevens.

Mrs. Pendleton held out her hand, "My dear Captain Edwards," she said.

"Another broken heart," someone exclaimed. "He'll drown himself when she goes. No, he'll take to drink."

"How good of you to come and see us," Mrs. Pendleton said.

The captain could not resist her smile. "I hed ter see Slack on a little business," he answered.

The good captain was unfortunate. His eyes betrayed him. It was not Slack he had come to see.

"He had to see Slack," a guest unfeelingly murmured.

"Anyhow, we're delighted to see you." Mrs. Pendleton meant it, and her laugh was good to hear.

"Take care of your heart, Captain," some one suggested.

He answered Mrs. Pendleton, "Air yer? Well, now!"

"Indeed, yes. You're coming to the dance?"

"It's a long time since—"

"What matters it?" It was her smile that was dangerous. The captain was unwary, she continued: "Don't you think now that we—er—the Virginia Reel, say?"

"Well, ef yer think yer ken put up with me for a partner—"

"She's landed him!" exclaimed Stevens admiringly.

"How kind of you," answered Mrs. Pendleton, "you'll come early?"

"O, I'll be here on time," he laughed.

He entered the house in search of Slack.

"That yacht of Fenton's is a dandy," observed Stevens, who was looking out over the bay. "She's just coming in from outside. She carries herself like a swan."

Mrs. Pendleton's face clouded. She had been happy in the thought that Fenton was away. She could not explain it, but she feared that he meant mischief. She said nothing, and in her

customary manner put aside all unpleasant thoughts. No one could remain long in the company gathered there, and think of their own concerns; they could not, in fact, think at all, for pandemonium reigned.

Mrs. Pendleton took advantage of their fun making to slip away unobserved. She had seen John approach and go in the direction of Slack's shanty. She had conceived the praiseworthy idea of straightening out his tangled love affair, and approached him with little ceremony. He was talking to Slack. She beckoned the fisherman to her. "Slack," she said, "leave me alone with Mr. Cary, I want to speak to him."

Slack surmised her intention. He smiled and went in the direction of the house, "ef anyone," he muttered, "ken bring John an' Hessie ter-gether, that one's th' widder. But I'm afraid she can't fetch it."

Mrs. Pendleton came to the point at once. Her tantalizing smile gave place to an expression of deep concern.

"Mr. Cary," she said, "don't think me presumptuous or meddlesome. I can't speak as freely to Hester as I can to you. I realize how things are. Is there no way to bring you together?"

He smiled sadly, said nothing and shook his head.

"She loves you," she said, "she idolizes you!"

"I fear not," he answered, "not enough to sacrifice her opinion."

"Sacrifice!" she almost spoke the word aloud. She looked at him, and wondered if a woman lived that would not give all but her honor to this man before her. Her eyes spoke her admiration.

"Tell me," she said, "is it because of that unfortunate Featherly affair, and what they say regarding it?"

"Yes," he answered sadly.

"I thought so," she said impulsively. "It's just like her. O, if she had only one-half my knowledge of the world, and one ounce of the contempt in which I hold it. Bah!"

Her tone was defiant. She could at that moment have given battle to the world single-handed.

"What *can* we do, Mr. Cary? I will not remain passive and see this thing go on. Is there anything that you can suggest?"

"I fear not," he said, "she is determined."

Cary had learned to recognize Mrs. Pendleton's true worth. He could read human hearts and faces, and he was satisfied that her interest was prompted by her love for Hester. She was the only one whose interference and advice he would tolerate; and he listened to her with a manly courtesy due to her honesty of purpose.

"Mr. Cary," her voice was low, but there was a look of fixed determination in her eyes: "What I am about to say, I truly believe, and I have some

ground on which to base my belief. Has it ever occurred to you that Hester might have been married to Mr. Featherly?"

John started and gazed at her for a full minute.

"No," he answered, "it never has."

"I believe it," she said quietly, "I don't know why, but I do. It's been my opinion since the night of Featherly's death. I believe that Hester is bound in some way not to reveal the marriage. If she has given her word, she would die before she would break it."

John was almost stunned by Mrs. Pendleton's assertion, and the earnestness with which she spoke. He had never considered such a possibility; but as his mind reverted to the night of Featherly's death, it appeared to him now more than possible that Mrs. Pendleton had guessed the truth. But even if it were true how could the knowledge help him? If Hester's reasons for remaining silent were of such a nature that she could have spoken and would not, and have saved her name and the suffering she had endured, how could he expect that she would now break her word. No, if her promise had stood between them, it was still the barrier that he could not overcome, and—here the nature of the man came to the surface—he would not ask it of her.

These feelings he explained to Mrs. Pendleton, until interrupted by her.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed with some irritation, "you're two simpletons, both of you. Such

twiddle-twaddle notions are fit only for school children. Go to her! Be sensible! Don't ruin both your lives."

He smiled at her impetuosity, but shook his head.

"No," he said, "if what you believe is true, I would not ask her to turn from what she considers her duty."

"In Heaven's name will you both consider what you are about? Here you are going away to some unknown land, and she—I tell you she'll fret her heart out. She has some romantic idea about not breaking her promise, and you're more to blame in not going to her, throwing your arms around her neck, making her understand that a whole lifetime of anguish and a promise kept, cannot equal one hour of married bliss."

She was carried on by the intensity of her feelings and, as she looked at him, tall, handsome, with the manly bearing that women love, she believed every word she said; and a sigh, eloquent in the consciousness of her own unmated loneliness, escaped her.

Further conversation was made impossible for the time being. Someone discovered Mrs. Pendleton talking with John, and, protesting that they would not countenance her designs on him, dragged her away. Besides, the dance-board had just been completed in the orchard, and they wished her to inspect it. They had, however, already pronounced it "too lovely for anything."

CHAPTER XXVIII

“ ’Twill remind me how well I loved you ”

When thou art gone, dear friend, when far away
I'll think the more of what thou art to me.
Thy portrait in my heart will live alway;
Entwined about it, love's sweet memory.

SALLY PITTS had not forgotten the party. Long before preparations had begun, she could tell the exact number of weeks and days to the event. She could tell, without an effort at consulting her memory, the exact number of persons present at Ethel's last birthday party, and here numbers vanished into a mist and became only a vague memory.

Neither had Sally Pitts been forgotten. She fondled caressingly an album given her by Ethel, in which were her own, Hester's, and John's portraits. Hester was putting the finishing touches to a new dress, and had sent for Sally to try it on. When she entered the sitting room where Hester was at work, and saw the pink and white creation, she exclaimed loudly and protested that it was much too beautiful to wear. But her fingers trembled with joy, and Hester helped her to remove her old faded dress, which Millie had made after the pattern of one she had

worn herself, and of a style long in disuse before Sally was born. The dress removed, the long, slender arms,—the bones of the neck and shoulders almost forced through the tightly drawn flesh, which was a dull marble color and apparently bloodless,—filled Hester with a shuddering pity. She kissed the child, and patted her gently. Sally laughed gleefully and declared that she was “ just ashamed, she was so skinny.”

Hester took in her hand the little bag attached to a ribbon that Sally wore around her neck and wondered what it contained—but even a child’s secrets are to be respected, and she said nothing. A shock of trembling expectancy seized upon Sally, and her heart stood still, for what seemed to her, countless ages. “ Why didn’t Hessie ask what was in the bag? ” But Hester smiled, unconscious of what she held in her hand, and fitted on the new dress.

The mirror reflected a thing of beauty, front and rear, flounces and frills. Sally was in a quandary whether to laugh or cry at what she saw there; but the sight of her album stilled her emotions and she sat beside Hester to dilate upon the beauty it contained.

“ Isn’t John handsome? ” she exclaimed, holding the album before her. Which womanly expression proved a discernment far in advance of her years.

“ Yes,” answered Hester, “ and as good as he is handsome.”

"Don't you love him, Miss Hester?"

"Indeed I do, Sally dear." A soft light shone in Hester's eyes, that deepened as she heard a step cross the dining-room floor, pausing at the threshold of the room where they were sitting, their backs to the door.

Sally scanned the portrait with a critical gaze. "Hasn't he lovely eyes?" she asked.

"Em! Just a little squint, it seems to me."

"Do you think so?" the child asked, looking up into her companion's face.

"Yes, I think so."

Sally held the album before her and turned her head to one side. "I don't think so." Then after a moment's pause—"and his forehead is so high."

"Let me see," Hester said. She took the album and studied the picture intently. "Not a very intellectual forehead, Sally. Quite the contrary. Em! very common-place."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes," Hester replied, handing the album back, "quite ordinary."

Sally was perplexed but not convinced, "and his mouth is so beautiful when he smiles?" she said.

"A weak mouth, Sally. See, the lines about his mouth show weakness."

Sally's face betrayed that her opinion of the mouth was still unchanged. She dearly wished

to find some feature that they could agree upon. Ah! she had discovered it.

“Hasn’t—he—lovely—hair?”

She waited in gloating anticipation. Surely nothing could be said against the hair, that had just a little wave in it to bring out the gloss.

“Well,” came the condescending reply, “If it weren’t for the color. It’s a sort of neutral color. But then, most everyone has lovely hair, Sally.”

“I think he’s just beautiful,” was Sally’s pronounced opinion.

“O just passable, Sally. Just passable.”

The child looked up quickly. There was a quizzical expression mingled with doubt in her eyes. “But you said you loved him, Miss Hester,” she said.

The figure in the doorway started.

“Did I, Sally?” Hester’s tone was incredulous. Then as a sort of compromise, “Well, perhaps I did, but we must love all our friends, Sally.”

A step behind her moved Sally to look around.

“O John,” she said, “why didn’t you come sooner and hear what we said about your picture?”

“Perhaps I can guess,” he said with a smile. “Eyes with a distinct squint,—” Sally’s eyes sought Hester’s in a surprised look—“weak mouth, receding forehead,—not at all intellectual—quite the contrary, hair of no color at all, and—”

"O, I don't believe Miss Hester meant a word of it. But that isn't all she said—"

"Sally, Sally!" Hester exclaimed reprovingly.

"Well, I'm going to the kitchen and tell Aunt Millie."

In an endeavor to see the new dress from all points of view, she nearly stumbled in going in search of Millie.

"Hester," John said, leaning over the rocking chair in which she sat, "How do you like the word-picture?"

"The word-picture will fade into the mist of nothingness: your portrait will live when you are gone."

He leaned over the back of the chair and pressed his cheek lightly to hers.

"'Twill be a reminder that you once loved me," he said.

"'Twill remind me only of how well I love you."

"Hester," he said gently, "if time should change your answer, and you can view things differently, will you send for me?"

"John, I can give you no hope. Can the pain an unkind word occasions ever be recalled? All the science in the world cannot restore the bloom of a faded flower, nor yet can the sun's warmth bring back life to the buds that have been nipped by the frost. Once a doubt is cast upon a woman's name, it follows her, shadow-like. Try to forget, John dear, try to forget."

He did not answer, but walked to the window and looked out at the group on the lawn.

Ethel came to the open window. She scanned his countenance disapprovingly.

“ Now, John Cary, can you give me any reasonable excuse for wearing such a forlorn look on my birthday? ”

“ No, Mistress Ethel,” with an attempt at a laugh. “ Eh faith! I cannot, unless I was thinking that after to-morrow I would not have anyone to torment.”

“ After to-morrow!” she exclaimed, “ you’re not going so soon? I won’t have it!”

“ Looks so,” he said, “ In three days I shall be sailing, sailing on the ocean blue,” he sang.

“ Hester, do you hear that? and you sit there as unmoved as if he were only going down to the wharf.”

Hester heard. She smiled. “ Never mind, Ethel. After all, it’s good to have your friends go away; they can write and tell you all about things, and what a grand time they are having. One always thinks more of one’s friends when they are not with them. You’ll write, John? ”

“ Of course,” he replied.

“ By the way, John dear,” Hester said, “ will you be here for the opening of the dance? ”

“ Of course,” he answered, “ how many dances will you give me? ”

“ As many as you ask for,” she answered.

Ethel interposed, "Now Hessie, that's not fair! It's *my* birthday, and John should dance with me, at least, part of the time."

John smiled, "So I shall, Ethy dear, if you will kindly dislodge those wrinkles from your forehead, for its alabaster surface was never meant to be disfigured by them. So," he brushed her forehead lightly with his hand, "now chase away that semblance of a pout from the corners of those ruby red lips, so," he kissed her on the lips and laughed.

"There John Cary, you're horrid."

"I know I am," he laughed, "and I feel like a thief. Here, I'll give it back."

Millie fluttered into the room in a state of nervous excitement. She appeared as if bordering on a collapse, but was, in fact, far from it. She was in a state of rapturous frustration. She had a thousand and one things to do, but refused help from one and all alike. She said that she could not possibly have everything ready on time, and was inwardly conscious and certain that everything, to the last finishing touches to the table, would be ready. She fumed and fretted, but withal was in a state of delight bordering on frenzy, for that she had something real and tangible to fret about.

"There, Hessie, I've got the last pie baked, and in the pantry a coolin'. The frostin' on th' ribbon cake couldn't be better, leastwise I couldn't make it so; and the sponge cake's in the

oven. If the cake falls, I'll be ashamed ever to show my face in the village again."

"Don't fret, Millie dear," Hattie said, "your reputation as a cook is secure."

"Sally Hopkins' goin' to help me to set the table; and Hattie, of all things! Myra Blindy Gates is goin' to wear that pink dress she wore to Ann Prouty's wedding. Her aunt used to wear it when I was a young girl. Myra had it made over, and she wears it every time she gets half a chance. I've got my opinion of Myra, and I call her a bold piece. Ethy dear, come with me and take a peek at the sponge cake. If it's fell—well there!"

With a gesture of despair she fluttered back to the kitchen, followed by Ethel.

Following the sound of hammering, Bill Blake came upon the industrious Slack, putting the finishing touches to the band-stand. He paused and grinned.

"Hello, Bill. Gosh! got on a biled shirt!"

Bill's mouth spread in a smile, self-conscious of his splendor.

"None er yer dern jokes now, Slacky. Yer needn't think yer goin' to do all the mashin' to-day. There be others ken discount yer on looks. Say, Fenton's sneakin' round down in the village. Wonder if he's plannin' on comin' to the party?"

"D'know," answered Slack, "if he's wise, he won't."

"He, he," laughed Bill, "Wonder ef he'd like another ride?"

Slack remained silent.

"Ther's an old gent ben down ter th' parson-age sense th' mornin' train got in, examinin' th' books as were saved from th' fire. Has one o' them magnifyin' glasses. Wonder what he's up ter?"

"O, he's one o' them cranks, p'r'aps, as write fer th' newspapers." Slack's hammer came down on the boards viciously. "Look here, Bill!" he said, "ef Fenton tries ter cut up any shines here ter day—" he paused and looked at Bill, "well he won't, that's all." Bill grinned and nodded his approval.

"Slack Dorkins." The call came from the house. Slack dropped his hammer, and Bill was left alone.

Mrs. Pendleton was ill at ease. The love affair of one of her protégés promised to bear fruit before the sun set. She had Slack trained to a point where further rehearsing seemed but a waste of time. He carried himself with the bearing of a man who already tastes the sweets of victory. He smiled condescendingly on the world at large; but tempered his smile with a tender meaning when he met "the widder." But despair seemed to wait on her efforts in John's behalf. She could brave a man, could talk to John as if he were a boy; but she hesitated to broach

the subject uppermost in her mind to Hester, who, smilingly complacent, appeared the calmest of the members of the household. She was an enigma to Mrs. Pendleton, who could not wholly understand her. But she was satisfied that Hester's tranquillity was assumed, and that behind it her heart was heavy with sorrow. But no word escaped Hester, and Mrs. Pendleton, from her experience with her in New York, knew that she could not be approached with offers of advice or sympathy. She was, however, a determined little woman. In her experience, the wormwood of defeat was still to be tasted. She sought the bench on the bluff, which seemed especially designed for lovers and lovers' confidences. The reader may judge of the logic of her reasoning, by the following, addressed, apparently, to the waves, that chattered in all kinds of languages at the foot of the cliff.

“If Hester and Featherly were married, what was the occasion for the secrecy? If it weren't on her account, then it must have been on his. Em!” a long drawn out exclamation. “Featherly's father's second marriage was disastrous. The world knows him as a woman hater. I knew him to be a polished gentleman, with one besetting sin,—an idolatrous love for Ralph, and a fear that he would marry. Why isn't it probable that Hester, knowing this, made some kind of a promise not to betray the marriage while the

father lived. She never considered the possibility of Ralph's death. When he was dying he tried to tell something to his father."

She thought long and deeply. The laughter of the guests from the house brought a frown to her face that was not at all becoming. "The magpies!" she said. She tried to look very savage. She did not succeed. "Why can't they keep quiet and let me think?" People said that she never had a serious thought in her life. They were mistaken. That much quoted element of society, designated "the people," almost always is mistaken. For out of a bewildering array of ideas, suggestions, conjectures and resolutions, this very sage and fixed resolve she whispered to the sea: "I believe it; and I'll act upon it. Before John gets away I'll see Ralph's father, if I have to go to New York to clear up this affair."

At that moment the gentleman in question was scanning the partly burned, and much defaced records in the village parsonage. But this she did not know.

CHAPTER XXIX

LOVE'S REWARD

To them that wait, to them that trust,—
Their faith unyielding, firm, entire,
To them there comes, as come it must,
The fullness of the heart's desire.
By weight and measure fair and true,
Doth time to them, stern justice yield;
To them such meed as is their due;
To them the power that victors wield.

It matters not what stand between;
It matters not the Fates delay:—
The hand of destiny unseen
Is guiding us upon our way.
Bide, then, thy time—be staunch, be true;
Mayhap good Fortune tarries late.
Be ready when it calls to you,
And answering, cry,—come thou, I wait.

“**A**RE there many men coming?”
Mrs. Pendleton looked her loveliest
in a jaunty sailor hat around which was
loosely coiled a band of white tulle, that fell in
streamers from the brim. The plainness of her
white duck suit was relieved by a bunch of roses
that was fastened to her corsage. Dainty, nar-
row pointed tan shoes completed her costume.
But it was the trim figure, the smooth round

cheeks browned by the sun and sea air, and the bluest of blue eyes that ever gladdened a lover's heart, or brought despair to a luckless suitor—and there had been many—that made your heart-beats quicken; and you were glad to look at her; for it made you feel at peace with yourself and the world, and reconciled you to much that was unpleasant. She had the power—all the more potent because of its unconsciousness—of making you believe in things; anyhow, of believing in Mrs. Pendleton while you were with her. There was a genuineness about her as rare as it was exhilarating:—a freshness, a cleanness of heart and of mind that was reflected in the eyes that met yours in a frank, fearless gaze.

Her pupil, strong in the newly acquired art of the modern love chase, looked at her with ill-concealed admiration.

“I’ve engaged two or three partners fer yer,” he said.

Millie sniffed the air disdainfully. “Some folks are as silly as some others,” she said.

This remark was of so general a nature that no one seemed inclined to claim the honor of inviting it.

“So good of you, Mr. Dorkins,” Mrs. Pendleton’s voice was tenderly appreciative. “I trust they can all dance as well as you. I shall never forget the beauty of the Chorus Jig that you danced for us in New York.”

Slack was seized with a paroxysm of coughing. He flashed a danger signal of warning at Mrs. Pendleton.

Millie's eyes shot fiery gleams, but her voice was sweetly solicitous as she asked :

"Hedn't yer better hev a little balsam fer thet cough, Slacky?"

"Guess I won't need it now, Millie, thank yer. You were a sayin', Mrs. Pendleton—O yes, 'bout the dance. The first set's Millie's." He glanced timidly at her. She was looking into space, and her lips formed the words,—“Chorus Jig.” He cast a hurried, troubled look at Mrs. Pendleton. Her eyes reassuring him, he continued: “The second set, ef yer're not engaged—”

“I shall be delighted,” she answered. “Do you know, it was only yesterday that I heard Miss Gates speaking of how well you danced.”

“Miss Gates,” echoed Millie. She said no more. The look she cast at Slack proclaimed her unspoken opinion.

He winced, but Mrs. Pendleton whipped up his courage with a look.

“O, you mean Myria Belinda?” he said.

“Yes, charming young person,” Mrs. Pendleton observed, “a quaint individuality.”

“Emm!” this from Millie.

“O yes,” said Slack, “she's very individual. She hed a good bit er property left ter her. Her Uncle Ed. died year er so ago, an' left Myria

pretty well fixed. O, she's right up an' around, Myria is."

"Ah, Mr. Dorkins, I fancied she was more than an ordinary acquaintance. O you men! you men! One never can tell."

Millie didn't speak, but her look plainly said that she refused to consider Myria—even remotely.

"Will yer go an' fix yerself up, Slack Dorkins? It's nigh on ter three o'clock an' th' folks 'll soon begin ter come."

She followed him into the house. Mrs. Pendleton turned to John who approached.

"Mr. Cary, tell me! have you spoken to Hester?"

"I have seen her," he replied, "but did not speak to her of what you said. It would do no good."

"How can you tell? You are like two romantic school girls. I've no patience with you. This much is certain: you're not going to South America if I can stop you. Anyway, you're not going alone. Heaven deliver us from the twaddle that fills young lovers' minds. Both of you should be spanked, and put on bread and water till you come to your senses."

"My dear Mrs. Pendleton, you don't know—"

"Don't know her! Don't I know that she's eating her heart out because you are going; and allowing some foolish notion to stand in the way

of her life happiness and yours? Don't know her, indeed!"

Confidences for that day were at an end. It lacked but a few minutes of three o'clock, and young Stevens led the shout that heralded the coming of the villagers.

They came, singly and in pairs, radiant with smiles, and colors that rivaled the flower besprinkled fields. They were in goodly number, for the prejudice of the good people had given way before the prospect of Millie's feast, and the very human desire that other eyes than their own should behold their finery, startling in its uniqueness, and daring in its originality. Their flower-bedecked hats nodded in the summer breeze, as if conscious of a seasoned knowledge, and with the familiarity of ripened age: for they had long done duty, and still bloomed in faded loveliness. Their wearers, gowned in flounces and frills, ambled joyfully along, conscious only of the admiring glances directed at themselves. They were there to conquer hearts, and who could withstand their charms, which seemed to shame the flowers by comparison? Who indeed!

And their male companions? The costumes that became their rough, manly homeliness,—which was not without charm,—they had discarded; and they burdened themselves with an attempt at gentility that was clumsily ridiculous, but pathetic in its self-consciousness. They were

not a bad lot, nor were they ill-looking; but the better part of their nature fretted and protested that, in their case, clothes did not make or fit the man. They had disfigured themselves with white, home-laundered shirts, whose fronts—starched to a rigid stiffness—irritated them. They were ill at ease in their “store clothes,” and their grease-soaked boots gave evidence of having lately resisted an attempt at polishing.

The “Commodore” was attired in her customary print dress, and, when she didn’t look disapproval at the fantastically colored and shaped costumes of her neighbors, she was authoritatively self-contained. She smiled benignly on her companions, and told them, with the utmost good-nature, that she considered them “a set of giddy little fools.” No one cared to dispute her, and they complacently tittered among themselves.

They straggled up the hill and were met by the guests with smiles of welcome. Slack stood before the house ready to receive them. Then it was that the merry-makers tasted their first surprised joy, for it was not often that their eyes were gladdened by the sight of Slack, arrayed as they now beheld him. His best suit embraced the plum-colored waistcoat and flaming cravat, which had elicited exclamations of awed admiration from the guests at the Featherly mansion. These he wore with a recklessness that was in

keeping with his crowning glory—his hair. He had made no effort to comb it, and they felt, when they beheld him, that he was still their Slack; that even his costume, effulgent though it was, could not disguise him; and they loved him the more.

He led the way, and waved them on to the orchard, where the dance-board had been erected. Millie and Ethel followed with the members of the household, chatting their delight and boisterously happy. Mrs. Pendleton brought up the rear, her face wreathed in a triumphant smile. She awaited developments. They unrolled themselves without warning. The star of her pupil was in the ascendant. With a now or never look he turned to the wearer of the pink dress:

“Myria Belinda Gates, yer jest lookin’ out er sight!” Slack accompanied the declaration with a coquettish chuckle under Myria’s chin that made that young lady—the term is here used in deference to the pink gown—toss her head, and turn the color of the gorgeous ribbons that adorned her angular form. Gasping with pleasure, she protested: “You git out, Slack Dor-kins!”

But Slack had no such intention. He took Myria’s hand in his own and looked unutterably happy. In his excess of emotion, he managed to say with a sigh, faltering but love burdened: “the sight o’ yer makes me feel twenty years younger.”

Myria cooed with pleasure, and her heart fluttered like a dove caught on the wing.

Mrs. Pendleton smiled with pride. "He's an artist," she whispered.

But Millie—she glared at him, and wondered if she were awake. How did he dare? This man! Hers! standing there before her very eyes, and holding the hand of that bold huzzy, who was tittering in an ecstasy of delight.

"Slack Dorkins!" she almost screamed the name. But Slack did not hear. He had a smile and a handshake for all; a tender word for the fair flowers of the village; then returned to Myria, and his eyes said to her many and beautiful things.

Millie was rooted to the ground. Surprise had given place to amazement, and angry resentment was struggling within her. Seth Binks approached. He stood between Millie and the object of her wrath. She tried to look over his shoulder, and he danced before her trying to invite her notice.

"Millie," said Binks, "I—"

"Slack Dorkins, do you hear?" There was no mistaking the tone. It was a command; but it told of annoyance beyond the power of woman to bear.

Slack was deaf to all but Myria's voice, and blind to all save the eyes that looked trustingly into his own. Mrs. Pendleton nodded her approval. Things in her world couldn't be going

better. Binks made another attempt to interest Millie. She couldn't look through him, so she pivoted from one side of his bulky form to the other in her endeavor to see her unheeding lord, who was absorbed in the contemplation of the color of Myria's eyes.

"I were about to say, Millie—" began Binks.

But she didn't heed him, neither did she see him. There were but two people in Millie's world at that moment. One of them wore a pink dress; the other looked with love-lorn fervor at the wearer of that hateful dress, and smiled.

Millie switched her skirts about. She looked away from Slack and Myria and arranged her dress nervously. This was something that she could not and would not put up with. Then someone giggled. The giggle became contagious; the laugh developed into a roar; and arms, heads and bodies danced in unison to the music of their voices. Millie turned her head. Yes, they were still deep in smiling confidences; and Myria's hand was in Slack's. This was too much. There was a limit even to her endurance. Of course she didn't care, but that pink-gowned huzzy should be taught—well she'd see.

"Myria Belinda Gates, I'd jest hev yer understand—"

But Myria was oblivious of all else but the man before her. Millie would have them know then and there that she would have no such exhibition. She was determined, and her carriage was ma-

jestic as she approached the pair, who were too absorbed in each other to notice the scornful glance that she fixed upon them. She walked forward quickly. Then, taking hold of the arm of the inconstant Slack, and tearing him away from the blushing Myria, she led him to where she had been standing. A hush of expectancy settled on the assembly. Something was going to happen. Millie wasted neither words nor time.

"Slack Dorkins, what d'yer mean by this er flirtin'?"

"I've waited fer yer fer th' past twenty years," he said, "an' I'm gettin' tired er waitin'. I'm not so young as I wer', but I'm young 'nough ter feel frisky when the gals come around. Time I wer' gettin' married, Millie, an' I don't get much encouragement from you."

"Well—I—swan! Slack Dorkins, yer jest take my breath away!"

He looked at her quizzically.

"'Tain't so sudden as it might be. I've ben askin' yer fer th' past twenty years."

"Well, I want yer ter understand one thing, Slacky, I ain't goin' ter let no one else hev yer."

He might be forgiven for the chuckle that preceded his words.

"Then it's yes, Millie?"

She cast a withering glance at the wearer of the pink dress.

"Well," she said, "I'll jest marry yer ter keep

yer from gettin' in ter wuss hands. No one else'd know how ter take keer er yer."

It was only a glance that passed between Mrs. Pendleton and the man who beamed upon his friends and the world with a look of idiotic delight. To Slack was flashed a congratulatory, "good for you;" his eyes conveyed the response, that said almost audibly: "I tell yer." Even Millie could not intercept the look, and only teacher and pupil understood its meaning.

The orchestra—a violin and a bass viol—was tuning up, the complaining tones of the instruments persistently refusing to conform to a uniform pitch. The violin, with reckless disregard for its companion, established a pitch that invited disintegration and discord, and squeaked a challenge to the more lumbering member of the family to follow its lead. The bass viol groaned disapprovingly and labored, like a small boat in a heavy sea, to climb to the giddy heights of its aristocratic tone leader. It strained lamentingly and, refusing to risk its own anatomy, sank, with resigned squeaks, a quarter of a tone below the pitch of the violin, and awaited, with tense drawn strings, the disruption of its daring dictator.

The leader of the band, with a wave of his fiddle-bow, commanded attention:

"Ladies and gents, take yer partners for the Virginia Reel. Mr. Slack Dorkins will lead off

with the future Mrs. Slack Dorkins, who comes nigh ter bein' th' best cook 'n housekeeper in this yer county."

A roar of applause greeted this delicate compliment to Millie; and proved the speaker's knowledge and judgment of cooking far in advance of that diviner, but less satisfying art—music. A poor cook can elicit more soul-stirring discords than the worst musician that ever lived. The guests formed for the dance and the band after a final attempt at tuning up began.

With a flourish and a bow, Slack went down the center, and as he returned, cast a scowling look of disapproval at the leader of the band. The music was not to his liking. Slack turned and pivoted, balanced and swung the next, and kept time to the discordant music, the players wrestling for supremacy in a deadly duel of sound.

Millie, not to be outdone, tripped off the figures with the agility of a girl in her teens. Hester and John watched the dancers with eager and admiring interest, and joined in the applause that greeted the dancing efforts of Slack and his partner. They finished the figure, and a second couple took their turn.

With a wave of his arm Slack called to the intrepid leader of the band.

"Hi, Jake, yer fiddle ain't within a row of apple trees er being in tune. What's the matter with er?"

This was a reflection on Jake's musical ability, and he resented it. He stopped playing and stood up. The bass viol boomed on alone, and the player, spurred on to extra exertion, performed most remarkable feats with his bow. Of melody, there was none; but he ground out the time, and the dancers responded with their feet.

"Come down here," yelled Slack to the irate Jake, "Millie'll give yer a few pints on dancin', an' I'll show yer a trick er two in fiddlin'."

Jake accepted the challenge, and Slack took his place beside the bass player. He adjusted the strings of the violin to the pitch of the bass viol, and dashed into the music of the old-time country dance in perfect tune with the bass. Not content with the simple melody, he added embellishments and variations of his own, and played up and down and across the strings with double stops, chords and frills, and even Millie, overcome by the exhibition, vowed she wouldn't have believed it; and the dance came to an end.

Mrs. Bagly seemed anxious.

"Ther'll be an awful time," she remarked to a neighbor, "when Mr. Fenton gets here."

"D'yer think he'll come?" her companion asked.

"I heered him say down ter th' store thet he wer' a comin'."

"O, I do hope ther' won't be no trouble."

"Serves Hessie right!" Mrs. Bagly looked virtuously indignant. "She'd no business tryin'

ter fool us all this time. *I knowed it from th' fust."*

The dancers were forming for the cotillion. Slack was receiving Mrs. Pendleton's congratulations; and Millie was looking askance at the wearer of the pink dress. Fenton walked leisurely up the hill and paused in front of the dancers.

"My good friends," he said, "I have not been invited. When I knew Miss Blair in New York—"

His voice was drowned by the threatening exclamations which arose from the men.

Mr. Featherly had approached unnoticed, and walking forward quickly, stood before Fenton just as John was about to rush toward him.

"Mr. Featherly!" John and Hester spoke the name at the same moment.

The color left Hester's cheek and she stood motionless, her eyes fixed on the old man's face. He held up his hand to restrain John, then turned to Fenton, who seemed overcome with astonishment.

"Stop," Featherly said to John, "before I answer him, allow me to make a statement. Miss Blair," he said turning to Hester, "I recently discovered among my son's private papers, evidence that he had been married while he lived in Norton. I have here the church records. I can decipher his name on a partly burned page,



“I—I cannot say.”



but the name of his wife is wholly destroyed. Can you tell me whose it is?"

A wave of emotion swept over Hester, leaving her face colorless. She tried to speak, but the words seemed to die on her parched tongue. The eyes of the villagers were fixed upon her face, and they waited, breathless and silent, for her answer. She looked about her in a vacant manner. The faces seemed to swim in a sea of mist before her eyes, until, with an effort, her gaze came back to the face of the old man, who was standing in a waiting attitude. She made an attempt to speak and paused; then, shaking her head, uttered in a feeble voice:

"I—I cannot say."

A jeering laugh from Fenton broke the spell that had settled on the villagers. They started, and looked at him.

"What a pity!" he said sneeringly. "If Miss Blair only could have had a marriage certificate. That's a very necessary requisite when there is a marriage. Too bad!"

In the life of every human being there is some moment when they enter the domain of manhood or womanhood. It may be at a time of extreme peril, of some unforeseen emergency arising; or of some acute joy or overwhelming sorrow, when they emerge from childhood, and discover a power within them, whose secret growth had been so slow and still, that they were unconscious

of it, and were startled at its sudden awakening. It came to Sally Pitts at that instant, and, affrighted at her own importance, with eyes bulging from their sockets, she stood before Mr. Featherly—a woman.

Sally fumbled at the ribbon about her neck, and with a vigorous pull, it snapped, and she held in her hand a little bag. She looked about her in a startled way, but no thought ever crossed her mind to hesitate, or to swerve from her purpose. The time had come for her to speak, and speak she would, even though the whole world stood still to listen. She cast a half-frightened look at Hester and spoke, slowly and distinctly. She was not Sally Pitts, the little cripple, she was *Miss* Sally Pitts and she would be heard, and of those who were surprised, none were more so than her father.

“Here is the certificate,” she said, taking the paper out of the bag. “I saw Miss Hessie drop it in the church. I was there and I picked it up. I was afraid to tell her. I saw her get married to Mr. Featherly, and I was so frightened and I—I—”

Sally got no further. Hester’s arms were around her neck and they were both crying together and rocking to and fro. Myria Belinda Gates could not find her handkerchief, and resorted to one corner of her pink over-skirt, which she stuffed into her eyes. Mrs. Bagly sniffled,

whether from joy or sorrow, will never be known. Between her tears she managed to gasp:

"There, Sary Dunn, I allus said as how I knew Hester was as innocent as a babe."

Hester was kneeling beside Sally. Mr. Featherly raised her gently.

"My daughter, can you forgive me?"

"It is easy to forgive you," Hester replied, "for I have never blamed you."

"Why did you remain silent so long?"

"I had given my promise."

"A sort of family reunion as it were," sneered Fenton. "Sorry I can't remain for the love-feast."

"Sir," replied Mr. Featherly, "I know you now for what you are. We want no trouble here to-day."

Fenton turned to leave. "Au revoir," he said with a smile.

"My dear Fenton, nothing like being in at the finish."

It was Mrs. Pendleton's voice. It was not like her to say it, but she should be forgiven.

Mr. Featherly turned to John:

"Mr. Cary, your uncle, whom I have known for the past forty years, tells me that you are going to South America. Hester, my daughter, I know John's story. Will you let him go?"

John did not speak but looked into her eyes. She laid her hand on his arm.

"John," she said, "will you go?"

"No," he replied, "not if you wish me to remain."

"I do," she answered.

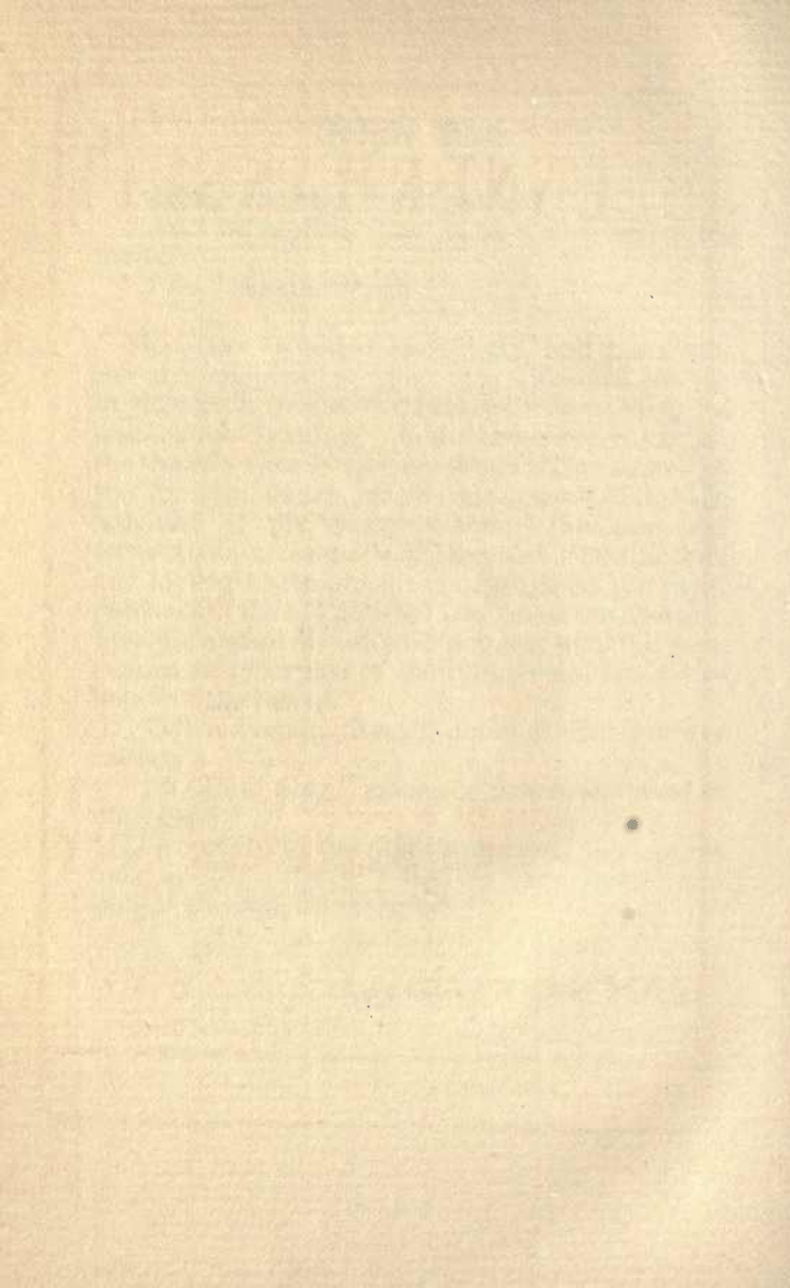
The stars twinkled knowingly, and the unobservant moon sailed away into unknown realms to reflect on lovers' confidences entrusted to its passionless keeping. John and Hester sat on the lover's bench on the bluff. The sound of the forceful dance music was deadened by the laughter of the merry-makers. Japanese lanterns made a fantastic attempt at illumination, and looked like night birds of brilliant plumage, perched on the old gnarled boughs of the orchard. The sea sighed in languid delight, and the mysterious whisperings of the night were hushed to listen to the lovers.

"Tell me again, Hester darling, that you are happy."

"Ah, John dear," came the response, "God is very good."

The curtain of the night deepened, and the sea took up the refrain, "God is very good," and sang it through all eternity.

THE END



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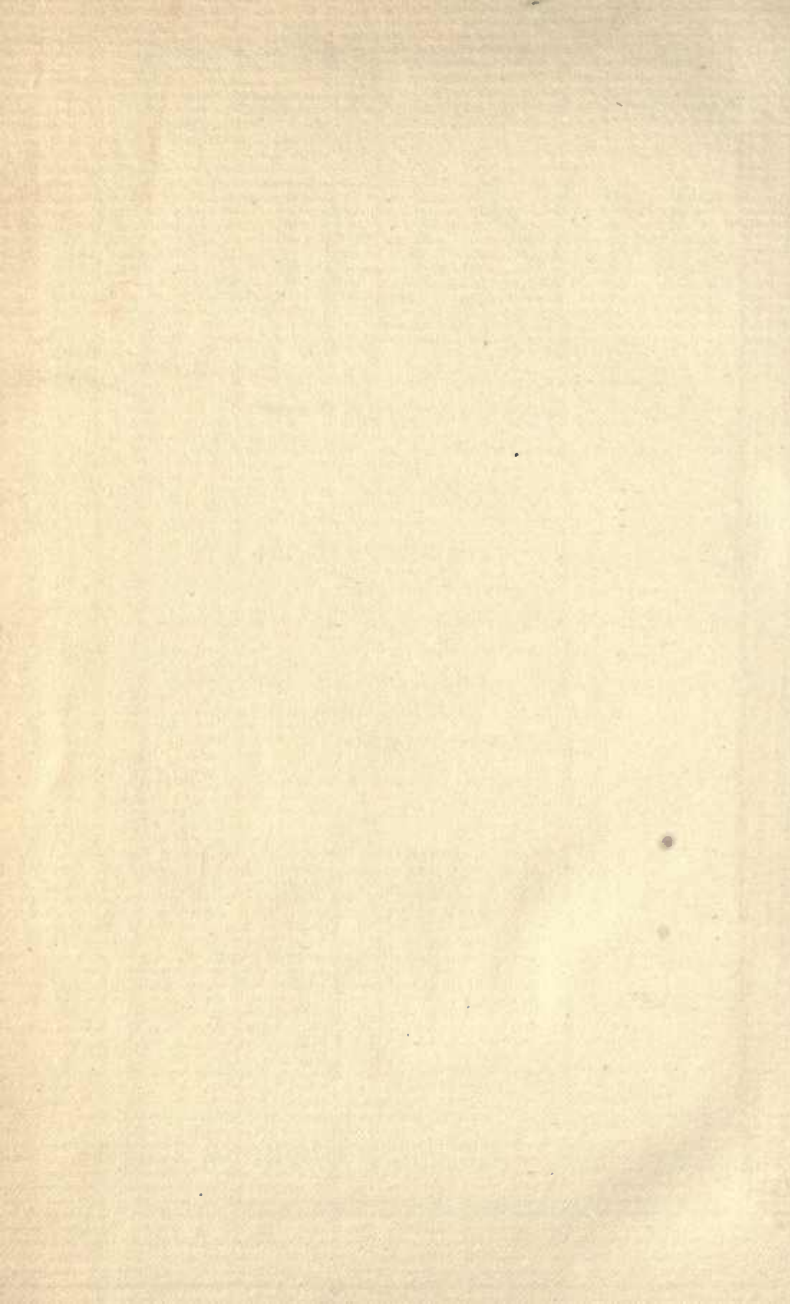
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